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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.
Find the Journal of Lutheran Mission on
Facebook.

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



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

THEOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK OF CITY AS MISSION FIELD

by Jeffrey Pulse

Why does the church need to return to the city?

this is a strange way to begin. However, it is a crucial question that necessitates an answer from the beginning. What credentials do I possess that would encourage a reader to trust my contributions to the subject? What do I know about this topic of "urban ministry," or any topic concerning the city as mission field? These are good and reasonable questions — questions that I ask myself on a regular basis. As I attempt

to give answer, I am certain the answers will only bring up more questions of a similar nature.

I grew up on a cow farm in Iowa — rural ministry should be my thing! I began my college years studying to be a veterinarian. When I could no longer "Jonah" my way free, I went to Concordia Teacher's College in

Seward, Nebraska, for a teaching degree and ended up at Concordia Theological Seminary in Fort Wayne because I was afraid of the big city of St. Louis. When I received my first call, it was back to the cornfields and cow pastures of rural Iowa — my comfort zone. There were 590 people in our thriving metropolis. After 9½ years it was on to Bremerton, Washington, a navy town on the Kitsap Peninsula across the water from Seattle. You could see Seattle but you did not have to make the journey. Then, after 12½ years, it was back to Fort Wayne and the seminary. This is not exactly the urban ministry portfolio you might expect from the writer of an article such as this.

However, a funny thing happened when I returned to Fort Wayne. I realized that I missed the parish desperately, so after one year when I was asked to serve as vacancy pastor of Shepherd of the City Lutheran Church in downtown Fort Wayne, I jumped at the opportunity. That was over eight years ago.

Shepherd of the City is a church in the urban core of Fort Wayne. Not quite the same as Baltimore, Philadelphia, Chicago, or St. Louis, but when you come to church early on Easter Sunday to clean up the bottles and syringes from the parking lot, you know you are not in rural Iowa anymore. These past eight years have been a steep learning curve for my family and me. I have learned a lot and am still learning.

I have learned that we live in a broken world, a broken

world with broken cities and broken people. Yes, I know you know this. Yes, I learned it at seminary. Yes, it is true wherever you go and wherever you look. But in rural ministry and along the tree-lined streets of suburbia, people hide their brokenness. They pretend there are no problems behind the white picket fences and the two

car garages. Problems are not for the community, not for the world to see — they are personal. Certainly there are problems, but "we are sucking it up," "we are handling them our own way," "we are receiving professional advice" — nothing to see here … move along. And so the façade remains intact, unscathed, shiny, and pretty.

In the inner city, in the urban core, brokenness hits you upside the head with the force of a two by four. Brokenness is not a pretty Band-Aid on a little boo-boo; it is an open, bleeding sore. It is there for all the world, all the city, all the community to see. In the city, brokenness is inescapable. You cannot turn a corner or close your eyes and it all disappears. There is no clicking the heels, reciting the mantra, "There's no place like home, there's no place like home," because this is home, home to so many. The only way to escape the brokenness of the inner core is to leave it behind, flee the city, hide in the suburbs, take up hobby farming, and that has been the

We act as if the people are the problem, as if the inner city is the culprit.

option chosen by many who have such options. It has also been the option chosen by many churches in our history. Get out! Run away!

Of course, that leaves the city broken. Nothing has been solved, no attempts have been made to deal with the reality. The only issue that has been addressed is that of our own fears. Now, outside the city we join others in hiding our own brokenness as we avoid the broken truth of others. Flight and avoidance are responses, but they are not solutions. And we know this, and we feel guilty.

Guilt is the great motivator. We feel guilty about leaving the city behind. We feel guilty about those people suffering in poverty. We feel guilty about the homeless, the hungry, the disenfranchised, and the victims. We feel guilty about all those broken people living in a broken place. And, in our guilt, we decide to fix things.

When my children were little they liked to play with balloons. One day they came home from a birthday party with balloons — three balloons, and then, soon, two balloons, then one balloon. This is when I began to worry.

So, I did what dads do. I lined them up for the lecture, for the talk. I warned them to be careful or they would soon be down to no balloons. It is no surprise as to what happened next. They messed around in all the wrong places in all the wrong ways. They did what I told them not to do and the remaining balloon popped. And along with the pop came the flooded eyes, dripping noses,

and pitiful whines, but this time it took a different direction. One of them grabbed the pieces of the balloon in his hands and led the procession to me. He held the pieces out to me and said, "Daddy, fix it!" I am not helpless in the area of repairing broken toys and such, but this was a bit above my pay grade.

So it is that we approach the city. In our guilt we decide to fix it — we need to fix it. And we try; we try to fix the people. We feed the hungry, we house the homeless, we clothe the naked, we free those imprisoned by drugs and alcohol with programs and treatment centers ... we try to fix the people. Then, we try to fix the city. We try to rebuild it. We restore the neighborhoods. We renew the communities. We renovate the abandoned houses. We rejuvenate the squalor. In our guilt, and yes, out of a sense of Christian duty and love, we try to fix the city. We try to fix the brokenness of the city by sending in resources, but then we back away and go back to the two car garages and

hide behind the picket fences.

There is a story, a true story as it was recounted to me, which took place in New York City many years ago now. It seems that one of the taller buildings in the city began to develop some very strange and concerning cracks in the concrete work on the 32nd floor. Obviously, this is not good. The first thing the owners of the building did was call in some engineers to check out what was going on. The engineers set about the task of trying to decipher the problem. It was obvious that the cracks were structural in nature so there was real reason for concern.

When this word concerning the structural nature of the cracks got back to the owners of the building, they immediately came over to find out what the engineers had discovered. They took the elevator to the 32nd floor, but the engineers were nowhere to be found. One of the secretaries told them that she had heard they were somewhere in the basement of the building. The owners were a bit puzzled by this, but they got back on the elevator and took it down to the first basement. They looked around

— no engineers. So they went down to the second basement — no engineers. They tried the third basement — no engineers. Finally, in the fourth and deepest basement they found the engineers poking around. The first thing the owners asked them was what they were doing deep in the basement of the building when the problem was on the thirty-second floor. Not so, said the

engineers, and they showed the owners what they had discovered — missing bricks! As it turned out, lots of missing bricks.

After an investigation, they learned that one of the maintenance men would come to the basement each day before he went home from work and he would knock out a couple of bricks and put them in his lunch bucket and take them home. When the authorities went to his home, they found that over the course of time he had built a BBQ grill, a patio, and a nice brick wall across his entire back yard. He had also removed a lot of bricks from the basic foundation of the building. But the only place the problem had shown itself, thus far, was on the 32nd floor!

The inner city and urban core is a messed up, confused place. So many problems, so many issues, so many man-made disasters, so many tragedies, so many heart-wrenching stories and we wonder, "What is the problem?" At whose feet do we lay the blame? Where

do we go to fix the mess? How do we best go about the restoration and repair? Children killing children, adults killing adults and children, sexual abuse, drug abuse, gang violence, rude, crude and illegal behavior, murder and mayhem ... and our reaction?

Our first reaction is to blame. The reactions of society, of governments, of communities, even of churches, have been predictable. Finger pointing, "I told you so" attitudes, political posturing and agendas, guilt trips and demands, and then our second reaction is to fix it! Fix the brokenness, fix the people, fix the city! And so, once again we feed the people, we house them, we clothe them, we free them from drugs and alcohol. And we rebuild the city. We restore it, we renew it, we renovate it, we rejuvenate it. However, we are fixing the problem with plaster in the cracks on the 32nd floor.

Our repair efforts may make us feel better, they may allow us to avoid the guilt that plagues us, they may energize our members for human care ministries, they may

even prove helpful in the short term, but these efforts are simply putting plaster in the cracks on the 32nd floor. Looks good, feels good, does good ... for a while, but those cracks keep reappearing and we are always surprised and troubled. What is wrong with those people? What is the problem with that neighborhood?

We act as if the people are the problem, as if the inner city is the culprit.

Well, the truth — popular or not — is that the people are not the problem, and the inner city is not the problem. The problem is sin! We know this. We know that sin is the dividing wall of hostility. We know that sin is a corrosive and destructive force in the midst of this world. We know that sin is responsible for all manner of disturbing, deviant, and disgusting behavior. And we know that sin kills — slowly or quickly — we know sin brings death. We know this.

We should know that ignoring or denying the foun-dational problem of sin will not make it fade away and disappear. We should know that covering over sin with plaster in the cracks on the thirty-second floor is no real solution. We should know that if sin and its reality in our world are not addressed we can prepare for another failure, another battle lost. We should know this, and I believe we do, but we keep trying to "fix" things without acknowledging the real problem — the problem of sin.

It is the same problem on the farm and in the burbs. It is the same problem around the world. Wherever human beings are found, the problem is sin. The problem is the same ... the problem is sin, manifested in ways not so different. It tends to be more a matter of degree and volume, a matter of visibility and acceptability, but the problem is universal, an all mankind problem — sin.

If sin is the problem, what is the solution? The solutions that have been developed, the solutions that man has created for this problem have proven woefully inadequate. Of course, most of these "solutions" indicate an unwillingness to acknowledge the true problem of sin and so they are doomed to fail. If we provide food and clothing there will be no more hunger and nakedness. If we provide housing there will be no more homelessness. If we give away stuff there will be no more stealing. If we provide health and wellness screenings and medical help there will be no more unhealthy living and unhealthy choices. How has that been working? And because it has

not been working, we decide to do the same thing more vigorously. More help, more money, more welfare ... this is not the recipe for success. Rather, it resembles the definition of insanity.

I am not saying these efforts are without merit at some level. It is good, right and salutary to reach out and help. It is a good practice and a biblical model to help one's neighbor. But unless we acknowledge and address the real prob-

lem of sin, we are simply putting bandages on a cancer. We are filling the cracks with plaster on the 32nd floor.

There is one solution for sin — all sin. One solution, and it is not the "social" gospel that we employ too frequently in the inner city. The solution is the gospel of Jesus Christ! Here is the "Theological Framework of the City as Mission Field": Jesus Christ, the Son of God, has come into our world and taken man's burden of sin to the cross at Calvary. He paid the price for our sin. Not with gold or silver, but with his holy and precious blood. Jesus Christ has washed away our sin so that we might be his people and live and walk in his paths.

But this is the same "Theological Framework for Mission" everywhere ... yes it is! It is the exact same because sin is the cause, it is the foundational issue that stands in the way of a right relationship with our Lord and God. The same issue, the same problem, because we are all one people, created and sustained by the One

God who sent his Son to deal with this problem of sin. The theological framework does not change with location or economic status. The theological framework of our work in the city must be the same as our work in the suburbs, the same as our work in the rural setting, the same as our work around the world. If it is not, then we continue to repeat the same mistakes over and over again. Unfortunately, we have a history of reversing the order, which begs the questions, "Do we understand the real problem?" "Do we believe that the word of God does what it says?" "Are we confident enough to truly invest in our mission to the city?"

In our cities and their urban cores, food pantries and homeless shelters have replaced churches. Food pantries and shelters are important, but the order has been reversed. If there is no church from which these services flow, how do we address the real issue, the foundational problem? If there is no church presence in the community, how is the gospel preached and confession and absolution provided? If there is no church building standing in the midst of the chaos, how will they know the presence of God in their troubles and trauma?

Where is the church? You may say that the "church" is the people of God, whether they live in the neighborhood or not, and you are absolutely correct. Certainly, we believe, teach, and confess this very truth — the church is those who believe in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, wherever they may be found. And I would never suggest that those people who come from outside the inner city to minister to the needs inside are not the presence of the church, but when the "church" goes home, the people are left confused and they wonder ... where is the church?

No steeples piercing the sky, pointing to heaven; no bells ringing, calling to worship; no structure in the midst of the hood providing sanctuary; no physical symbol of a hoped-for spiritual reality. Where is the church? The physical has always helped us to see and understand the spiritual. Consider how the "city" is viewed in God's word.

"City" in Scripture is focused around two things: earthly Jerusalem and heavenly Jerusalem. Earthly Jerusalem is the place where God dwells in his temple. Early on, with tabernacle and then with temple, God established his presence with his people by being in the center of the camp, the center of the city. And he did it with a physical structure that would point to the spiritual reality of God dwelling with man, of God being truly present in their midst. God dwells in the midst of his people and his throne room is the Holy of Holies in the

temple in the city. The "church" is visible in the midst of the people, in the midst of the city.

Why does the Son of God become flesh and tabernacle among us? Why does he come and reach out to the outcasts, the sick and diseased, the impoverished and destitute, the prostitutes and lepers? Why? Because these people have been separated from the temple — they cannot come to the dwelling place of God — so, God comes to them. Jesus, the new temple, comes to them, in their midst, physically before their eyes.

And what of the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of God, the city on the hill, the courts of heaven, the place where God dwells and where we will dwell with him, in his midst around his throne? When the people of Israel looked upon the temple in Jerusalem, they were reminded of a greater reality. They were reminded that God was dwelling with them, but also that they would one day be dwelling with God in the heavenly mansions prepared. The physical presence of the temple in their midst reminded them of this eternal reality and they had hope, even when the enemies were knocking at the gates.

This is the pattern established by God in Holy Scripture and it is this pattern that we re-examine and revisit as we consider the city as mission field. The church needs to return to the city, not just the people, but also the building and a worshiping community of faith. In order to stand firm in the city, we must first return to the city with mission eyes wide open. And not just in thought, word, and deed, but also with the real presence of God's church in the midst of it all.

From the physical community called "church," outreach, mission, and ministry flow forth. This reality is powerful and the symbolism is just as powerful. "God has not abandoned us. The 'church' has not left us." "The God who provides us with hope as our sins are washed away; the God who pours out his grace upon us through word and sacrament; this God, our LORD dwells with us in this city so that one day we may dwell with him in the courts of the Heavenly City."

Stand firm in the city! See the "city" as a mission field, see the "city" with mission eyes, not because the inner city is more important, but rather because the urban core is equally as important as any mission field, because it is a place where people dwell. Stand firm in the city by being a physical presence in its midst. The Church, physical and spiritual — from that place the hungry are fed, the thirsty receive a cup of water, the naked are clothed, the homeless are housed, the sick are healed, those in prison are visited

— these acts of physical mercy flow forth from the physical presence of God's church in the midst.

I believe that the church, especially The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS), is uniquely situated for the mission field of the city. The LCMS is uniquely situated to reach out to, and to reach back into, the urban core of our cities. Whether this is accidental, intentional, or intuitive I cannot say; however, our current direction and focus, even developments, will prove critically important.

Our emphasis on a ministry of mercy and the language of mercy has reentered the church. By the very definition of mercy, it demands that we reenter the city, and not just a "mission trip," but even more as a physical mission field with churches planted and worship services that teach and proclaim the mercy of Christ from which our mercy must always flow. Christ's ministry of mercy was especially directed toward the widows, the orphans, the sick, the lame, the blind, etc. In other words, the impoverished outcasts of the world who find themselves separated from the church by their situation. The language of Scripture used to identify the coming Messiah in both Old and New Testaments is, "The lame shall walk, the blind shall see, the prisoners will be set free. ..." These are acts of mercy and they are the specific marks of the Messiah. I believe them to also be the acts of mercy that identify those who believe, teach, and confess this Messiah — the church! The inner city, the urban core, abounds with opportunities to be Christ-like.

Another development in the LCMS that puts us in an enviable position as we are about the work of the kingdom in the city is the resurgence of the role of deaconess and parish nurse. When I first began to serve as pastor of Shepherd of the City Lutheran Church, everyone was nice, cordial, and happy that I was there. They treated me well, respected me as pastor, and smiled when they shook my hand at the end of the service, but it was obvious that the women of the congregation were being careful. They liked me, but did not yet trust me or their trust in me still needed to be verified before they would open up. One year later, our first deaconess arrived on the scene and began to serve at the church, and in one week, she knows everything! The women of the congregation immediately take her into their confidence — they trust her. It took me over four years to even begin to approach this level of trust. There are many reasons for this reality, but the role of deaconess has proven invaluable to our work in the city. I believe the availability of deaconesses and parish nurses

will be an integral component to the greater church's outreach to the inner city mission field.

The mercy focus and the role of deaconess and parish nurse are important parts of the inner city as mission field. However, they are most effective when they flow from the community of faith within the community. All of the challenges and opportunities can be best met by taking the church and replanting it in the city where it once stood as a witness and symbol of God's presence with his people. From this perspective, the real problem of sin can be dealt with in the way that God has provided — through a faithful word and sacrament ministry. A word and sacrament ministry that goes forth from the altar out onto the street brings about change. Confession and absolution that flows from our risen Lord and Savior changes people, and changed people change neighborhoods.

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ENGAGING THE WORLD IN THE INCUBATOR OF IDEAS

What is our responsibility with regard to LCMS youth as they venture off to college?

by Marcus T. Zill

s we prepare to celebrate the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, we are reminded that big things happen when those who dare to witness to the truth of God's word on a university campus don't shy away from the public arena. While not all ideas are conceived in the academic square, many of them — both good and bad — are certainly powdered, diapered, nourished, and even burped there. Thinking happens where thinkers are.

The Lutheran church cannot escape the great incubators of ideas; she was born on the academic turf of a German university at Wittenberg. Throughout her

history she has not forsaken the campus though she has not always placed adequate resources there. The time for this to change is now. The stakes are simply too high, and the ever-multiplying mission and mercy opportunities are simply too plentiful.

Like unto Athens of Acts 17, the university is a place permeated with worldly philosophy and religion. It is not a matter of there being religion on campus. Our young people will be ministered to, but ministered to by whom, and ministered to with what?

We have a solemn responsibility to help keep our own precious sheep in the fold as they venture off to college. The wisdom of the world is on full display in the academic quad and the wolf is a welcome recruiter there. In addition to being subject to an endless matrix of secular progressive ideology, our precious youth will be tempted to forsake their faith, and far too often many will lose it as the word of God is increasingly marginalized and mocked.

As we continue to slide into a post-Christian era of influence here in the United States, the impact upon our youth has been simply staggering. Almost 28% of all incoming freshman today list "no religious preference" on studies of rising college freshmen. This has doubled in only one generation. The percentages of those who additionally identify themselves as agnostic (8.3%) and atheist

(5.9%) are also increasing.1

Also, like unto the Day of Pentecost in Acts 2, the university is a gathering of people from many races and nations. Since the early 1950s, a slow but steady silent migration has taken place to our shores from the four corners of the world not to access US healthcare, or to necessarily escape persecution, but to take advantage of our US system of higher education.

According to the Institute of International Education, a little over sixty years ago there were only 34,000 international students on US soil. Today there are nearly 975,000 international students enrolled on US campuses, and this

number is increasing exponentially at the rate of about 8–10 percent a year. When including dependent family members, it is not a stretch to say that there are roughly two million internationals populating our campus communities.

The top four countries are China, India, South Korea, and Saudi

Arabia, the first three making up half of all international students in the United States. The largest increases are from the Asian corridor, and increasingly the Middle East, Northern Africa, and especially Latin America and the Caribbean.²

In one short generation we have witnessed an unprecedented surge of international students on US soil, many of whom come from countries presently closed to our missionaries, or where our work might otherwise be hindered. These international students, by the nature of their reason for being here, are some of the most highly gifted and intelligent people from their countries.

on p. 9.

¹ See the latest results of this fifty year continuous survey sponsored by The Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) at the University of California, Los Angeles: http://www.heri.ucla.edu/monographs/ TheAmericanFreshman2014.pdf. The religious preference results begin

² The latest date on Open Doors from the Institute of International Education can be found at http://www.iie.org/en/Research-and-Publications/Open-Doors#.

Every year these internationals are temporarily uprooted from their familiar social, economic, cultural, and religious surroundings and transplanted here on the colleges of this land. While our international mission fields are critical, no longer are the only mission fields in places like Nigeria, Venezuela, and China, but the best and brightest Nigerian, Venezuelan, and Chinese students are increasingly finding themselves in places like Champaign, Illinois, College Station, Texas, and Tempe, Arizona.

This should challenge us to a new way of thinking. There are many obvious strategic, financial, and logistical advantages in terms of cultivating such mission outreach here at home. Our campus ministries can clearly also serve as strategic mission outposts in our own nation, even as many already are.³ This does not mean the alteration of our current campus ministries, but recognizing the incredible opportunities that God has given us to expand them, and perhaps significantly so.

In his Admonition to Prayer against the Turks, Luther demonstrates how God can utilize the catecheti-

cal instruction of our young adults toward missionary witness:

And finally, I strongly urge that the children be taught the catechism. Should they be taken captive in the invasion, they will at least take something of the Christian

faith with them. Who knows what God might be able to accomplish through them. Joseph as a seventeen-year-old youth was sold into slavery into Egypt, but he had God's Word and knew what he believed. And he converted all of Egypt.⁴

Hopefully our young people won't be sold into slavery or carried off in an invasion as Joseph was in Genesis 37:12ff, but clearly we, and they, have plenteous opportunities to confess the faith in the midst of this unique invasion, if you will, of international students that our gracious God is simply bringing to us from all over the world.

We need to step up our catechesis of our youth as they head off to college, not only so that their faith is not stolen, but also so that they might boldly confess their faith to the world that awaits them there. We also must refrain from making the tragic mistake of diverting resources from our campus ministries and outreach posts right at the time that the opportunities on campus could not be greater. Instead, let us become even more intentional and aggressive in our efforts to equip our young people and those who work with them on our nation's campuses. Full-time international student domestic missionaries should also be considered in key locations.

There are ultimately many reasons to **CARE** about campus ministry today, but I believe they can be summarized as follows:

Catechizing and caring for our own Apologetics in the academic square Reaching out to those who are lost Engaging a dying culture with Christ

This is no time for timidity, and I, for one, believe our young people are ready for this challenge. In a culture marked by pluralism, we confess that Jesus Christ alone is "the way, the truth, and the life" (John 14:6). In an age of relativity, we gladly confess the reliability of our Lord's

words, and the truth and certainty of his promises. And in an age of higher educational migration, we have been given an open door to cast the net of the gospel not only off, but also on, our very shores.

The challenges are certainly great on campus today, but the opportunities are equally plentiful. The continued exposure to faithful Lutheran doctrine and practice on campus is not only essential for our own youth, but also in order to reach out to those who are atheists and agnostics, as well as internationals. Our campus ministries also serve as a great place to help groom "our" best and brightest students who might desire to be pastors, deaconesses, geo or career missionaries, and who will continue the cause of campus ministry and mission outreach elsewhere in, with, and through their various vocations.

Let us dare to not forsake, but greatly expand, our work in our nation's incubators of ideas for the sake of the gospel, where our young people may be equipped in the academic square to live as faithful confessors of Jesus Christ and His Word, and where God has opened incredible doors to what is quickly becoming perhaps our greatest domestic mission field.

The Rev. Marcus T. Zill serves as the LCMS director of Campus Ministry and LCMS U.

 $^{^3}$ Many thanks to all those associated with International Student Ministry over these many years. Learn more about their important work at www.isminc.org.

⁴ LW 43:239.