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NEW FRONTIERS

by Steven Schave

What do we think of when it comes to mission work?

WHEN WE THINK OF MISSIONS, we typically think of days gone by, when we sent a missionary out into the field, in some faraway place, to reach a people group who had never heard the gospel. And to be sure, this work has borne much fruit, as we now have mission activity in nearly ninety countries. We have planted not only churches around the world, but have helped in establishing self-sustaining church bodies with their own administrations, mercy operations, and seminaries. And it would seem that the need for theological education of indigenous church leaders is at an all-time high in these places.

Contrast that with what has happened over the years in the United States. As our partners in the global South have seen growth in Christianity, the United States, along with the rest of Western civilization, has seen its decline in terms of those attending church. From a merely anecdotal perspective, the average LCMS member who remembers the 1960s and 70s can still recall that in the neighborhoods they grew up in, it was a bit of a stigma for a family to not have a connection to a local church. But today, serving in a metropolitan city, it would not be shocking at all to meet a child who has never even heard of Jesus.

With that said, the United States has been dubbed the third largest population of the “unchurched,” behind only China and India. Urbanization and “urban pioneers” are reversing the trends of flight from the city with expectations that 80% of the population will soon live within city limits. Great efforts are being made to revitalize and repopulate the city, and for the first time they are outgrowing their suburbs in many areas. Our cities are

literally where the world is at our doorsteps, with people from around the globe living together in a city block. To be sure, the cities of the United States are some of the greatest mission fields there are on the planet. And as the city goes, so goes the culture, influencing politics, arts, and technology. But from a Christian worldview, the cities also bring great difficulties as they are seen as places filled with turmoil, corruption, religious persecution, crime,

unrest, poverty, and immorality. And so amidst these challenges, the church is losing its foothold in the most densely populated locations in the United States. But as we see with the prophet Jonah, God demands that we preach repentance and forgiveness in the city, if for no other reason than there are just so many souls at stake.

Our rural communities, where a very large portion of our existing churches are located, have also fallen on hard times with many of the same challenges as our urban areas. And while rural America is typically associated with being a place of traditional values

and churchgoers, it too is becoming more and more secularized. Suburbs have long been thought of in terms of white picket fences, gated communities, and block parties, but with the advent of the digital world, the fabric of fellowship has been torn and walls are being mounted in a country divided. And things are changing rapidly throughout the United States, with huge demographic shifts and massive immigration influxes. This is *Mission Field: USA*, with its many contexts and incredibly diverse landscapes. Regardless of how different the environment may be, however, there is one human condition and one gospel needed by all.

While church planting and revitalization may seem to be only concerned with new mission in new frontiers, to be sure, it is also a continuation of the reformation of the Christian church.

The challenge of mission today in America is therefore twofold. On the one hand, the vast majority of our existing congregations are declining. On the other hand, our church body does not reflect the shifting demographics of a new America in terms of age, ethnicity, and location. And this is where we might diverge in mission priorities. Do we say that planting new churches among new people groups in new locations does not bear enough fruit for the investment that is needed? Do we make it our priority to “increase our base” through growing families who are strong in the faith and double down on our efforts in revitalization?

Or do we say our existing congregations are going through a natural life cycle and should have a dignified end, thereby saying that all of our investment should be made in planting new churches and reaching new people groups by raising up ethnic immigrant church workers to serve these diverse populations and helping to rebuild communities both physically and spiritually? It is indeed a false biblical dichotomy to pit revitalization against church planting, as much as it is to pit international against national mission. To be sure, there are unique contexts and challenges, but let there be no doubt, God wishes for all men to be saved.

In terms of revitalizing a congregation, “vital” is the key component of “revitalization.” Wherever the word is proclaimed in its purity and God’s sacraments are rightly administered, there is spiritual vitality. But is spiritual vitality enough for a congregation to be vital? Congregational vitality begins with spiritual vitality, but it also includes factors that affect its ability to begin, increase, or continue activities that convey the spiritual vitality of word and sacrament ministry. The new Synod revitalization program, *re:Vitality*, systematically addresses congregational vitality to determine a congregation’s stage of vitality and the most effective ways to preserve, increase, or restore it through a three-part approach: Objective & Consistent Self-Assessment, Action-Oriented Training, and Equipping God’s People for Outreach-Integrated Witness. The needs and circumstances of congregations vary.

re:Vitality goes from self-assessment to improving the effectiveness of congregational outreach by intentionally creating connections, building relationships, and making disciples. This is a biblical understanding of how we are involved in God’s mission to reach the lost:

What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you believed, as the Lord assigned to each. I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth. He who plants and he who waters are one, and each will receive his wages according to his labor. For we are God’s fellow workers. You are God’s field, God’s building. (1 COR. 3:5-9)

Conventional wisdom in regard to national missions and church planting would tell us that we must start the equivalent of 2% of the number of our existing congregations (~122 a year) for us to simply maintain the number of communicant members in the LCMS. So too, conventional wisdom would dictate that to reach the most new converts requires new churches in new places. Likewise, it is true that planting new churches is part of the very fabric of the LCMS, as is mission to new people groups. But this will take a shift in priority to see the United States as a ripe mission field in need of investment. As a nation, we are divided, our inner cities continue to struggle, and the masses have a negative view of organized religion. And yet we must remain bold confessors, weeping prophets, gospel-bearing marauders who stand before the gates of hell even as we might be outcasts.

In the days of the Israelite exiles who found themselves as resident aliens, God did not call them to withdraw from the world. While not compromising their values and beliefs, they were also called to be the best citizens they could be: serving the poor, being charitable to their neighbors, reaping hot coals on the heads of their enemies through their good works, and being known for how they loved one another. And in the age of the Diaspora, in the midst of persecution, the early church planted congregations in large urban areas and strengthened the existing congregations in times of adversity and division. This was and is and ever shall be God’s mission, never more so than in these dark and latter days.

While church planting and revitalization may seem to be only concerned with new mission in new frontiers, to be sure, it is also a continuation of the reformation of the Christian church. In this 500th year of the Reformation, we see that here in the United States there is indeed much confusion and a shadow that covers over the gospel as in the past. The very same confession of faith that was brought into the light all those centuries ago is

now needed as much as ever in these modern times. And wherever this seed of the Lutheran witness is planted, it is reformational by its very nature. Faith alone, grace alone, Scripture alone, Christ alone—that is most desperately needed by those broken by sin in the United States. And by the word of God, the LCMS in the United States will find renewal again in the difficult days ahead.

This is a watershed moment in a new frontier: to reach into the heart of the city, to have a pivotal role in racial reconciliation in America, to welcome those coming into our nation, while reaching back into an era of witnessing amidst the skeptical and even persecutors. As we turn the chapter, it will be all hands on deck to support our missions and our missionaries who will be pioneers of global mission work right here in our own backyard. This is not institutional preservation; it is being faithful to our call to reach the least and the lost!

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