

RESPONSE TO DETLEV SCHULTZ: "LCMS MISSION — A PARADIGM OF ITS OWN"

by William W. Schumacher

I'M GRATEFUL TO Professor Schulz for his paper and the argument he sets forth about how we in the LCMS should connect "church" and "mission." There is much to discuss here, and we should pursue this conversation long beyond the few minutes I have for a response today.

I will focus mainly on the need for clearer definitions of both his main terms. What exactly do we mean when we speak of "church" and "mission"? Without greater clarity, I think we will often speak past each other.

First of all, "church." Professor Schulz builds a case for the important role of the church in overseeing or steering mission activity. While Professor Schulz often seems to use this term as a synonym for our denomination, it is surely just as consistent with our tradition to understand the word, first of all, in a congregational sense. It could also, depending on context, refer to "tribal" churches (*Volkskirchen*); some kind of international body, such as the International Lutheran Council (Why do we call our denominational headquarters the International Center?); or even perhaps the *una sancta*. The question is, which kind or sense of "church" legitimizes these activities we call mission? To which "church" should mission societies submit?

Ecclesial authority and legitimacy are inherent in our vocabulary of "mission" and "missionaries" as we generally use those terms. Those terms were not used in this way in the ancient church, but they originated in the Jesuit missions of the 16th century. According to that usage, a "missionary" is defined as an ecclesial agent who is authorized by the church somewhere else and who is thus accountable somewhere else. This means the

missionary is not primarily accountable to the people he serves — the church where he works — but to other people, another church.

This disconnect between authority and service, between ministry and accountability, is a serious tension in our own theological and missiological history. In an international context, it often means that we (i.e., European/North American Christians who are, after all, generally funding these efforts) are only willing to recognize and take seriously churches where we have sent missionaries to work as churches to the extent that it suits us and perhaps to the extent that they agree with us. Because of an imbalance of power, money, access to education and the like, we should hear a bitter irony in Schulz's description of German

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missionaries in East Africa: "The missionaries stayed away from enforcing final organization and structural independency on these native tribal churches." Such paternalism, or even (neo-)colonialism, still looms as a danger as long as "we" conceive of international missions as "our" right, as something we do for *them*, according to a divine order of "mission" from the rich to the poor, from the powerful to the weak, from the West to the rest and so on.

I think David Bosch has some helpful insights in this regard. (I probably have a more positive assessment of the value of Bosch's book than my colleague does.) Bosch argues that "mission as church-with-others" is a key feature of what he calls the "emerging ecumenical paradigm." And while the word "ecumenical" certainly has negative baggage for us, we might start by taking more seriously our "ecumenical responsibility" together

with our Lutheran partners in the International Lutheran Council as churches, not simply the objects of our mission efforts. Bosch suggests: “A donor syndrome is still very much in evidence in the affluent churches of the West and a dependency syndrome in churches of the Third World.”¹

We should ask whether this is still true, and perhaps even true of us and our partners. If I take as an example one very important and positive program with which I am familiar, the Global Seminary Initiative,² we should ask why our partners have not been more involved in the planning and structuring of this very important initiative. That is, other churches function almost entirely as “recipients,” and while this is not necessarily the same thing as dependency, it should prompt us to reflect carefully about how we conduct ourselves.

In a domestic or national context, there is the same temptation to paternalism/colonialism especially (but not only) when we speak about (and plan and design and fund) so-called “ethnic missions.” While we generously acknowledge that (as Schulz puts it), “Our heritage informs us that the tribal and vernacular concerns of the people are still valid,”³ we are too likely to assume that white Anglos of northern European origin are not such a “tribal” or “ethnic” church, but rather the normative embodiment of transcendent, supra-cultural truth.

Here again a reminder from Bosch is helpful when he urges that the emerging mission paradigm involves “the re-discovery of the local church” and argues that the “church-in-mission” is always local. This is certainly nothing new to the LCMS, as our own theological tradition emphasizes the local church so strongly.

Now we need to turn briefly to the term “mission” and try to be more explicit what we mean when we use it. Should “mission” be understood functionally, as all efforts, or at least organized efforts to communicate the Gospel with those outside the faith? Or does “mission”

refer to certain kinds of organizations, such as mission societies? Should the term be taken as a structural component of our denominational org chart (as in Office of International Mission, Office of National Mission, Chief Mission Officer⁴)? Perhaps “mission” means every intentional effort by Christians (or by the Church — and what is the difference?) to ensure that those outside the faith hear the Gospel (AC V)? Should we make distinctions between terms like “mission,” “evangelism,” “evangelization” and “witness,” and if so, why and how do we make those distinctions?

Once again, I think David Bosch’s analysis is helpful in sorting out these questions and untangling these threads. In this regard, we must first of all keep clearly in mind that his series of “paradigms” does not simply describe a historical sequence, but that all the paradigms coexist (and, in a sense, compete) in the contemporary church. And despite Bosch’s labels, the various paradigms are not fundamentally to be identified with denominations or confessional traditions. For example, we hear — within our own Synod — voices that insist that the true and only authentic mission of the church is simply to live out its liturgical and sacramental life. “The Church is the aim, the fulfillment of the Gospel, rather than an instrument or means of mission ... Mission is not to be regarded as a function of the church ... The Church is the aim of mission, not vice versa.”⁵ Those are expressions of the “ecclesial missiology” of the Eastern Church. On the other hand and at the same time, we may encounter in our own LCMS the assumption of universal or global jurisdiction that gives our church (our Synod) the legitimate authority to send missionaries anywhere in the world, coupled perhaps with assumptions of superiority and often militaristic language about the conquering advance of the Gospel (read through our mission hymnody and note how much military language is there), and these are features of what Bosch calls the Roman Catholic paradigm. Many more in our Synod, of course, put much less emphasis on ecclesial authority and focus on the responsibility and right of individual Christians to be creative and entrepreneurial in building

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¹ David Bosch. *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1991), 380ff.

² Editors’ Note: The Global Seminary Initiative is based on the desires of LCMS partners who have requested theological education in their respective areas.

³ Klaus Detlev Schulz. *Mission from the Cross: the Lutheran Theology of Mission* (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2009), 10.

⁴ Editors’ Note: The purpose of a Chief Mission Officer is, in non-profit organizations, to keep an organization on task with its goals and priorities. *Mission* here is not used in the sense of *missionary*.

⁵ Bosch, 207.

structures and choosing activities in direct obedience to Christ's Great Commission — with little regard or patience for ecclesiastical niceties. These folks reflect what Bosch calls “mission in the wake of the Enlightenment.” And they probably resonate with the view of mission historian Andrew Walls, for whom the mission societies are a “fortunate subversion of the church.”

These different paradigms are not past periods in the Church's history, nor should they be used as labels for this or that denomination. Chances are, they all coexist in this room (maybe even inside your head!). The fact is, we operate with deeply differing notions of what “mission” is or should be, and those differing presuppositions make conversation more difficult. At the very least, let each of us be clear what we're talking about when we say “mission.”

Forgive me if I have misunderstood, but I take it that Detlev's unique LCMS paradigm is a version of the 19th-century confessional reaction against non-denominational (or specifically unionistic) efforts that de-emphasized Lutheran doctrinal distinctives. Bosch also discusses this confessional reaction in his chapter on Enlightenment missions, and he quotes Scherer's rather harsh assessment: “The kingdom of God was reduced to a strategy by which Lutheran mission agencies planted Lutheran churches around the world. Questions were seldom asked at this time about the relationship of these churches to the kingdom of God. Their very existence appeared to be its own justification, and no further discussion of mission goals was required.”⁶

I submit to you that we can and must be able to ask such questions and give a fuller account of the relation between “uniquely Lutheran missions,” “uniquely Lutheran churches” and the kingdom of God.

Finally, but by no means least, I missed in Prof. Schulz's paper an adequate engagement with the foundational insight that “mission” in the proper sense of the word is neither an ecclesial activity in obedience to a divine command, nor an ecclesial structure for oversight and control of such activity. Mission must be understood, first and always, as *missio Dei*, the mission of God, in which God is the primary actor. The *missio Dei* embraces the whole biblical narrative from creation to new creation, and it centers in the decisive intervention by God in the person of Jesus Christ for the salvation of the world. God is still at work in the world to carry out His mission, and He calls the baptized into fellowship with Him in

Christ, and that means also cooperation in the *missio Dei*, what God is doing. “All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation ... Working together with him, then, we appeal to you not to receive the grace of God in vain” (2 Cor. 5:18ff).

Such a focus on the *missio Dei* as the starting point and guiding theme in our missiology fits well with a (solidly Lutheran) doctrine of the Word. For we know that the Word of God is not simply divinely accurate information or data to be downloaded, but God's own power through which the Holy Spirit continues to work to create and sustain saving faith in Christ in those who hear the Gospel. Lutheran missiology revolves around hearing the Gospel, and that puts us together with the world as hearers of what God does in Christ. As Bosch says, “The church is itself an object of the *missio Dei*, in constant need of repentance and conversion; indeed, all traditions today subscribe to the adage *ecclesia semper reformanda est*.”⁷

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⁶ Ibid., 332.

⁷ Ibid., 387.