Closure on Singapore—Well, Not Quite

Colleagues,

> This week's posting is the report Marie and I recently sent to the Division for Global Mission of the ELCA on our work in Singapore in March, April, May this year. We served under the "Global Mission Volunteers" program of the DGM. A number of you on the Crossings listserve also "volunteered" to help pay for our plane tickets to get us there and back. For which much thanks.The "not quite" in the topic line above signals that after a few weeks home from our Singapore assignment, we are going back, d.v., to SE Asia for a couple more tasks. First one is the Eleventh Quadrennial Conference of the International Association for Mission Studies [IAMS] meeting at Port Dickson in Western Malaysia for 8 days (July 31 – August 7). I'm presenting a paper there on Luther's Mission Theology.

The week thereafter, also in Malaysia, but 1000 miles toward the rising sun in East Malaysia –yes, a unique country, two parts with 1000 miles of water in between—there's the invitation to discuss the same topic in 4 lectures at a week-long LWF-sponsored seminar at Sabah Theological Seminary in the city of Kota Kinabalu. We said yes.

And after that a few days with Crossings friends (Presbyterian, Baptist, Pentecostal) in Bangkok (Thailand), and then a stopover in Korea with Crossings alums on the way home. Given the recent jump in jet fuel costs our airfares are 50% more this time than they were just 5 months ago. Donations welcomed to the Crossings office for "Crossings-Malaysia." P.O. Box 7011. St. Louis MO 63006.

Here’s the report on Singapore.

Peace & Joy!
Ed Schroeder

ELCA Global Mission Volunteering with Luth. Church in Singapore [LCS] –
March, April, May 2004
A Report by Edward and Marie Schroeder.

I. *The calling card they printed for Ed read “Theologian in Residence.” The basic paradigm was that we spent 2 weeks in each of the 7 congregations of the LCS. What that meant for daily work was preaching and teaching in each of the seven congregations during our fortnight with them, plus other “church-wide” events during our three-month stay where he was asked to be the speaker. Here’s the list–*
    - *20 sermons*
    - *8 Monday morning seminars with all LCS pastors discussing Lutheran hermeneutics (how to read the Bible, how to read the world) and the theology of the Lutheran Confessions.*
    - *6 teaching sessions at Trinity Theological College, working with Lutheran seminarians in a course called “Lutheran Distinctives.” [This course is the one distinctively “Lutheran” component in the otherwise “general Protestant” seminary education of LCS clergy. Nearly all LCS pastors were educated at Trinity Theological College (sponsored by the mainline Protestant denominations) or Singapore*

Bible College (the "evangelical" alternative to the mainliners). As far as we learned only two or three of the 20-plus LCS clergy ever attended a Lutheran Seminary—either in Australia or Hong Kong.]

- *15 sessions in Adult Education, some in local congregations, some church-wide.*

  Topics:
  Why Jesus in View of Other World Religions? (several times)
  Theology of the Cross and the Modern World
  Lutheran Theology for Discipleship and Spirituality (several times)
  Theology of Suffering
  Living as Easter People—in Freedom, in Hope
  Christian Callings in a Secular World (several times)

- *Retreat master for two-day LCS clergy retreat in neighboring Malaysia. Focus: Discipleship and Spirituality According to Luther's Small Catechism*
- *Before and after the three months in Singapore these addenda:*
  - *Guest lectures at the two Lutheran seminaries in Hong Kong*
  - *Guest lecture on Luth. Hermeneutics at the STT Abdi Sabda seminary in Medan, Indonesia (the Batak churches)*
  - *Trinity Sunday sermon at the Int'l Lutheran Church in Hanoi, Vietnam*
  - *3 presentations in Manipur, India*

II. Some thoughts from Ed about all this.

1. *It was a lot of work. Though warned by "old Asian hands" mission veterans that the Asians will load stuff on to you, I was busy but I wasn't*

overworked. Main reason was that I could draw on stuff archived over my past 45 years of teaching—much of which was on the computer. The sermons were all crafted anew.

2. *The LCS pastors and people were super hospitable in their TLC of us, with LCS Bishop John Tan in the lead. We lived in a furnished flat that had everything we needed. We received US$300 each month for food and other living expenses. We were frequent guests of pastors and laity for lunch and dinner. Throughout, "the natives were friendly."*
3. *A number of LCS pastors, including the Bishop Tan, told us that they are aware of the "thin" Lutheran substance in LCS church preaching and practice, and they expected me to help them improve that. I took that as my basic assignment.*
4. *From what we learned there are no "liberal" Protestant churches in Singapore. That includes the Methodists, Presbyterians, Anglicans—and especially the Baptists. "Church Growth" ideology imported from America, plus American evangelicalism with its leanings to legalism, plus mega-church mindsets (also from America) appeared to us to dominate the Protestant scene. Over and over again LCS pastors would cite authors from this genre of American church life, and were then surprised when I didn't know most of the names they mentioned. "But, they're from your country!" The "success" of such local congregations teases (tempts?) Singaporean Lutherans. More than one pastor told us of pressure from his lay leaders for them to do likewise, "so we too can grow." Everybody knows that bigger is better. I wonder where they learned that.*
5. *Some LCS pastors did indicate that these American*

imports were not "kosher," but "Reformed" in their theological base. Also that a "success" gospel is closer to theologies of glory than to the theology of the cross. Yet how to cope—even with a more solid Lutheran theology (my assignment)—was a frequent discussion topic and continues as a struggle for some. "Successful" congregations—[we worshipped(?) in one such with 15,000 members]—are regularly linked to "prosperity-gospels." So it was in the service we attended.

6. *Because I was almost always the preacher for the LCS Services we attended Sunday after Sunday, on only one occasion did we hear preaching by an LCS pastor. So we don't know about that. After our seminar sessions on Lutheran hermeneutics some pastors "checked" their sermons with me to see how they were doing in using what they learned for their own preaching.*
7. *It was in Sunday worship where less-than-Lutheran theology and practice surfaced most for us in many of the LCS congregations we got to know. Many Sunday services—even "liturgical" ones—inserted 20 to 30 minutes of "praise music" early on in the liturgy. The texts of those praise songs were uniformly from the American evangelical-fundamentalist heritage referred to above. Decision theology, loving Jesus, hyping God's almighty power—with constant ego-centric references to what "I" want to do for you Jesus ["I just want to thank you, Lord!"] and endless repetition—were the substance of the gospel being proclaimed in these songs. The "genuine Gospel" of God's forgiveness, the fundamental distinction between God's law and God's gospel, Christ's promise as the Gospel-core,*

faith as trusting that promise, the centrality of Good Friday and Easter, proclaiming what Christ "wants" to do to and for sinners—in short, Lutheran language of the theology of the cross—was basically unknown in those texts, as it is in the American theology where those songs came from.

8. *Central to such praise singing, of course, was the song leader, usually a young woman or man, who not only selected the music and led us in singing, but also spoke her/his own sermonettes and prayers into the mike, regularly re-enforcing the less-than-Lutheran ("other") Gospel that we were singing. Such song leaders are dedicated folks, eager to "serve," but seldom helped to improve, yes, to replace, the generic Protestantism they have imbibed with its egoism and legalism. They have no explicit training, and above all, no theological vetting, to credential them for such worship leadership. On some occasions I consciously slanted my preaching in the last half of the service contra the "other" Gospel proclaimed in the first half.*
9. *Note well, it is not the praise "music" I'm critiqueing, but the theology of the texts of the praise songs. It should not be too difficult to get this under a more Lutheran—i.e., more Gospel-grounded—umbrella, I think.*
10. *Although I did on a few occasions preach (with interpreter) at Chinese-language services in the LCS, I had no access to the realities of the rest of the worship in those cases. Six of the seven LCS congregations have both Chinese-speaking and English-speaking constituencies—and thus Chinese and English services every Sunday.*
11. *Conclusion. Marie and I had three happy months with*

the LCS. I'm upbeat about the LCS and its promising future. Not that they don't have, and won't have, struggles. This is true, not only in the "competition" with the alien gospels of the local church scene, but also vis-a-vis the secular gospels of Singapore, a secular culture strangely interwoven with Chinese folk religion and Buddhist beliefs. But then American culture—both churchly and secular—is a strange mish-mash too.

12. *We received many tokens of appreciation from the LCS including a "love gift" at the end along with an engraved memorial plate. They uniformly thanked us for the Lutheran resources we'd made available for them. In conversation with a number of them—both pastors and parishioners—I'm confident that many of them did indeed "catch" it, namely, the Augsburg Confession's "Aha!" about the Gospel. Granted, Chinese etiquette, Chinese demeanor—also inscrutable—is always proper and polite. So we may not have seen the full picture. But the final signal for us that they really meant what they said was at our departure when four of the pastors (that's 20% of the LCS clergy!) got up at 4 a.m. to carry our luggage into their cars and see us off at the airport for our early morning flight home from Singapore on June 17.*

Respectfully submitted
Marie and Edward Schroeder