

The LCMS Mission Affirmations of 1965—Then and Now

Colleagues, Contrary to popular perception the LCMS is not a monolithic entity. Nor was it ever. Some say they were squabbling about doctrine before they even got off the boat in 1839. And it continues today even after the sweeping purge of “liberals” 30 years ago that created Seminex, and (tell it not in Gath) nudged the expelled Missourians to nudge the ALC and LCA of that era into becoming the ELCA. In the current Missouri debate—framed superficially as “conservative vs. moderate”—there are a number of hot potatoes. One is about missions. How could there be a debate, you ask, about missions? Well, in Missouri anything is fair game for a fight.

One facet of this one is the allergic term “church growth,” a mission method and theology that has many fans in Missouri, though none of its roots are patently Lutheran. ‘Fact is, they come from “the Reformed,” an ancient dirty word within Missouri for items of theology or practice that “ought not to be so among us.” But Missouri’s current leadership has made “church growth” the synod’s approved mission theology [See ThTh #258, May 22, 2003]. So the folks who purged the liberals in the 1970s are on the ramparts to do it again, this time to fellow conservatives who somehow have been bewitched by alien mission theology.

No wonder then that the “Mission Affirmations” [hereafter MAs], approved at the synod’s Detroit convention way back in 1965—after almost 40 years of hibernation—are coming front and center in the hassle these days. Lines are being drawn in Missouri’s sand: it’s pro and con on the MAs. One of the groups within the LCMS today pushing for “Gospel-grounded openness in the synod” is the Daystar network, a collection of “moderate”

Missourians (a few of them Crossings-types, I'm told, but not all). They are coming to St. Louis next week to rehab the MAs. At least, that's what I get from reading their conference program on the Web. And the "con" folks, so one Missouri insider told me, are "agin 'em"—opposed both to the MAs and to the Daystar folks. So much so, said this source, that "if THEY start pushing the MAs, it'll blow the lid off." The current story of the LCMS, which may still surprise some, is a tale of two cities. Though they both are "in Missouri," they are definitely not on the same page.

Some folks were "agin" the MAs back in 1965 when they were adopted with wide support at the LCMS Detroit convention. The MAs were patently too ecumenical for these folks and, even worse, the MAs had some hard words for Missouri's unfriendly attitudes toward other Christians. Both of these for the "agin-ers" were no-noes. Those allegedly unfriendly attitudes, so said the "agin-ers," were nothing more than a concern for doctrinal purity and Biblical truth. And if you are from Missouri, what's wrong with that? There is no higher priority.

But the critics didn't stop the MAs in 1965. How could a synodical assembly say no to "mission affirmations"? So they passed with broad delegate support. But they didn't go anywhere—at least at home within Missouri. More obvious already at that convention was the other trouble brewing in those days focused on professors at Concordia Seminary in St. Louis. So four years later at the Denver convention President Oliver Harms, who had pushed for the MAs (and had NOT held the sem profs in check), was unseated and a clean-house president put at the helm.

He did clean house at the seminary—and then at the synod's mission department, where the MAs had been welcomed as fresh air indeed. With the demise of those mission execs the MAs too

became a dead letter—and have been so for 30 years in the LCMS. Still they are “on the books.” They are the synod’s canon law, in LCMS jargon “our official position.” And the fight that never happened 40 years ago might happen now as partisans line up on both sides of the gulch and check their muskets.

So the Daystar crowd is coming to town. Their conference program is the original MAs from top to bottom. A number of those coming are friends and former students. With today’s ThTh 291 I’m welcoming them to our town.

Although I was around when the MAs were being put together, I wasn’t involved. The grand master of the MAs was Martin Luther Kretzmann [Hmm, an MLK!], known as “Mick” to his friends. I too was his friend, mostly via my job at Valparaiso University where his oldest brother O.P.Kretzmann was VU’s president. But I was a generation younger, and besides that, folks at “Valpo” (especially those in the theology department!) seldom got asked for help on LCMS agendas.

To my knowledge the LCMS mission board asked Mick, dean of Missouri’s missionaries with life-long service in India, to consult with his mission colleagues and produce a consensus of their own “affirmations” to present to the synod. The end product was presented at the Detroit convention in 1965. Insiders knew that it articulated Mick’s own personal mission theology hammered out in decades on the Indian mission field, and that it was a departure from Missouri’s tradition , but he had broad support among his colleagues. I’m not privy to “how” it all happened. So I’ll now move to looking at the text itself and saying what I see.

The MAs are 6 single-sentence affirmations. They are succinct and pungent. One of MLK’s associates from those days “appreciated the aphoristic quality of Kretzmann’s titles.

They're easy to hold in mind and to mull on." But as aphorisms it's not easy to detect just what they mean on first reading. That was doubtless deliberate (and politic) on Mick's part. Each one a simple subject, then the word "is," then a predicate. My hunch is that many delegates at the Detroit convention didn't quite know what they meant either. Perhaps the mystic simplicity enhanced their majesty. They were just too good not to be true.

Here they are:

1. The Church is God's Mission
2. The Church is Christ's Mission to the Whole World
3. The Church is Christ's Mission to the Church
4. The Church is Christ's Mission to the Whole Society
5. The Church is Christ's Mission to the Whole Man
6. The Whole Church is Christ's Mission

Comments:

1. First of all, novelty. The very rhetoric of the MAs was new in Missouri. They are assertions, "doctrinal" assertions even, but none of them sounded like the doctrines (plural) regularly taught in Missouri's catechism classes—or preached from pulpits. Where was the language we all knew—inspiration, redemption, justification, sanctification, et al.? The very word "mission" wasn't in the vocabulary of Missouri's doctrines. Not even in Schwan's explanation of Luther's catechism. So the language was novel. But it sounded good. Who could object?
2. Their aphoristic form urges the catechetical question: What does this mean? So the Daystar conference is following the tease of the MAs themselves—to mull them over and figure out just what the Whereases and Resolves that followed each affirmation are saying. [They were presented as 6 separate resolutions to the convention,

voted on and passed one-by-one.]

3. There is some breast-beating in the opening prayer that leads to the resolves. "Our disobedience against Thy Law and our littleness of faith in Thy Gospel." "Preserve us from that pride which thanks Thee that we are not as other men are." [Of course, the language is non-inclusive. It was 1965.] In the resolutions that follow we hear of "our sins of self-centered disobedience...our own institutional self-interest." And in the final resolve of MA #6 we have a string of "we deplores," some of which are patently "in house" maladies, though the text doesn't actually say so.
4. The theological construction. What are the MAs built upon? What are the groundings, the foundations, for the resolves? Just what is being affirmed? And then by contrast, what is being negated? Let's take them one at a time.

4.1. The Church is God's Mission

After five whereases that rehearse the history of salvation concluding with a Pentecost whereas "The Father and Son together sent the Holy Spirit into the world as the great Missionary until our Lord's return," the resolves assert that God's in charge of mission, for us it's not optional (though we've treated it that way in Missouri "giving self-preservation priority over God's mission"), and we commit "ourselves, our congregations, and our Synod into God's living hand as willing instruments of His great mission to the world."

Summa: Mission is God's own operation. Negated is that it's "our" operation, or "our synod's" bailiwick. No, God is the proprietor. God assigns the task to us, but he is still the owner-operator.

4.2. The Church is Christ's Mission to the Whole World

Since “God so loved the world” and since “Jesus sent his disciples out into all the world to make disciples of all nations,” the conclusion is obvious. It’s the whole world where God is already actively at work—even in folks of “other faiths.” That entire resolve was “new” in Missouri. It reads: “Christians will approach men of other faiths in humility and love. They joyfully acknowledge that God is active in the lives of all men through His continued creative and providential concern, through the Law written in their hearts, and through God’s revelation of Himself in creation and nature. Christians affirm a common humanity with all men. They confess a common sinfulness. They rejoice over a universal redemption won for all in Jesus Christ.”

After such left-hand-of-God appreciation of other religions comes then this friendliness to other Christian folks out there on the mission frontier (also something possibly never before articulated in orthodox Missouri’s history): “Resolved, That we recognize that our sister mission churches in other lands have been placed by God into other circumstances and are subservient not to us but to the Lord, who makes His church His mission to the whole world.”

It is at these two points that the “agin-ers” then and now bristle. Where is the critique of the false doctrine in these other churches—and, for God’s sake, surely in those pagan world religions? Negated is that very “mindset” of Missouri’s tradition where all non-Christians are simply godless heathen, AND where even other Christians, because of their doctrinal defects, are not in the same ballpark with us—and possibly (though we pray it is not so) not in the same ballpark with God.

Reminds me of a story. A Missouri pastor and a Roman priest in the same small town became good friends (mirabile dictu!), had coffee each Monday morning and rehashed the weekend. Upon leaving the LCMSer regularly said: "OK, Ron, let's get back to doing the Lord's work. You in your way and I in His." MA 2 says no to that.

4.3. The Church is Christ's Mission to the Church

What does that conundrum say—church in mission to the church? Answer: the church's witness and ministry is not just to outsiders, but to church-insiders too. Mission is also in-house ping-pong amongst folks whom Christ has linked to himself and who call him Lord. Consequence? "To enter into a real and living unity with every other member of Christ's holy body, the church." That was ecumenical dynamite within Missouri, calling Missouri to use its Lutheran Confessions not to build doctrinal fences, "a kind of Berlin wall," but "in good conscience both to witness and TO LISTEN to all Christians. . . . By virtue of our unity with other Christians in the body of Christ, we should work together . . . [to] edify Christ's body and advance His mission."

Negated again here is the fear of "unionism," Missouri's scold-word term for mixing with the heterodox. Standard in my growing-up in Missouri for avoiding non-Lutheran Christ-confessors was Romans 16:17, "Mark them that cause divisions and offences contrary to the doctrine you have learned, and AVOID them." MA 3 says no to that.

How this open-armed ecumenism got a majority vote at a Missouri convention in 1965 is a mystery. Must have been the wind and fire of the Holy Spirit.

4.4. The Church is Christ's Mission to the Whole Society

Luther is specifically invoked here to commend openness to the world, the place where “the Christian does God’s work in the world through various vocations in the home, church, and state.” Curious here is the negation of the term “secular” for such work, a term which Luther himself used as a “good” work (“weltlich” in German) for such “world-work,” whether done by Christians or the unbeliever. The final resolve pushes Missourians to full engagement in the otherwise “secular” world. “Resolved, That Christians be encouraged as they attempt, under the judgment and forgiveness of God, to discover and further His good purposes in every area of life, to extend justice, social acceptance, and a full share in God’s bounty to all people who are discriminated against and oppressed by reason of race, class, creed, or other unwarranted distinctions. Christians recognize that all their fellowmen come from the Father’s creating hand and that His Son’s nail-pierced hands reach out in love to all of them.”

The contra here addresses the blindness—not only in Missouri—that God’s work is confined to church-work and that world-work, though not necessarily the devil’s terrain, is not as godly as church-work is. Missing here in the MA itself is the “Aha!” that God’s world-work and God’s-work-in-Christ, though from the same God, are not the same work. Preservation of creation and its redemption are two very different operations. The latter entails the death of God’s Son, the former does not. They are hardly the same. More about this below.

4.5. The Church is Christ’s Mission to the Whole Man

The contra here, to which MA 5 says no, is the heritage common in more than one Christian denomination that

mission is about “saving souls.” This MA puts bodies into the salvation equation. Its supporting grounds for that are the body-soul-mind ministry of Jesus recorded in the gospels, and the words of Luther in his exposition of the 10 commandments. “Christians help and befriend their neighbor on our small planet in every bodily need. They help their neighbor to improve and protect his property and business by bringing him economic help and enabling him to earn his daily bread in dignity and self-respect. Christians minister to the needs of the whole man, not because they have forgotten the witness of the Gospel but because they remember it.”

And finally

4.6. The Whole Church is Christ’s Mission

Mission is not the preserve of the clergy. Au contraire: “Every Christian is commissioned a missionary through baptism.” No distinction on this one between the ordained and the “merely” baptized. “All who are baptized into Christ are baptized into His death and resurrection, into His MISSION, and into His body; therefore be it

Resolved, That we affirm that the whole church is Christ’s mission.”

Even “church-work” is not the preserve of the ordained. And from that affirmation comes a string of “we deplores.” “Therefore we deplore anything that seeks to divide what God has joined together” with clericalism and laicism leading the list. There follow other deplorable dividings of what God has joined—not all grounded in the fusion brought on by baptism. “We deplore the racism which refuses to repent of its sin and denies the unity of all Christians in Christ and His mission. We deplore the

desecration of Christianity by the multiplication of sects as though the Gospel were a religion of human design instead of God's outreach after men in the giving of Himself. The divisions in the institutional church are as real as the unity in Christ's body which joins all Christians together. We deplore the wars and political struggles that set Christians and other people in one nation against those in another."

And in closing, MA 6 makes this humble admission: "We recognize that the Christian lives in the tension between his own imperfect understanding of God's truth and his knowledge that in spite of errors and divisions he is joined together in Christ's body with all who truly believe in its Head. The Christian lives in the tension between Christ's lordship, which is perfect, and his own disciple-ship, which is not. The Christian rejoices over the existence of every fellow believer in Christ his Savior, because thereby Christ is preached and His mission is implemented, for the whole church is Christ's mission."

Comment: At this summer's Lutheran World Federation assembly Marie and I had lunch with Iteffa Gobena, president of the Mekane Yesus church in Ethiopia, our friend from days gone by when we were mission folks there. Mekane Yesus has been growing by hundreds of thousands (sic!) each year. Its membership is over 3 million. Bigger than Missouri. In a couple years it will be bigger than the ELCA. What's the secret? "Everybody knows," said Iteffa, "that if you are baptized, you are a missionary." And then he added this: "In a recent survey of new members we learned that only 8% of them heard the Gospel through a pastor or evangelist. All the rest heard it from people who were 'merely' baptized." And he laughed.

Summa: The MAs were dynamite in their day for the LCMS. And in the LCMS mission fields, so one veteran told me, they were explosive—palpably liberating and energizing. But at home they were not. Could be that their time has now come in Missouri's current tug-of-war. If so, they could be made even better, and I was going to offer the Daystar folks some hints for doing just that.

Specifically—in their Gospel-grounding. E.g., Christ is the cornerstone throughout the MAs, but his cross and Easter don't get mentioned, and if not mentioned, then not used to build this otherwise feisty missiology.

—in offering some hermeneutical help to reduce the fuzziness of their concept of mission—still common throughout the missiological world—that everything God does in creation is finally the same ball-of-wax, and that it is all the one “Missio Dei.” Here's how one grown-up-in-Missouri missionary put it: “The MAs use ‘God's mission’ and ‘Christ's mission’ more or less interchangeably, as if there's no distinction to be made between ‘God’ and ‘God-in-Christ,’ between ‘God-at-work-in-the-world’ and ‘God-at-work-for-the-world-in-and-through-Christ.’”

My take on this: Yes, Jesus did “social ministry” left and right. Yet the folks he fed, healed and raised from the dead subsequently got sick and died again. Lazarus too. Not so the folks whose sins he forgave. That forgiveness never died. Which is the headline screamer of John 6, Jesus's long sermon on bread in the wilderness and THE bread of life. Jesus himself makes the distinction. It's not a Lutheran invention.

What that missionary is calling for is to make that cardinal distinction between God's law and God's promising Gospel, especially when it comes to mission. But few in Missouri in 1965, and few now (so it seems to me) see that distinction as

primal for actually “doing” theology. Thus “law-and-gospel” becomes a shibboleth (also in the MAs, sad to say) which all affirm, but few use (or know how to use?) in the theological enterprise. Ditto for the ELCA today.

Enough already. This is the calling of the Daystar crowd. A number of the names on their conference program (yes, there are women there!) learned this cardinal distinction for doing theology in earlier years. [I know. I graded their exams.] Perhaps they will remember. I hope so. It really is their job. If I hear that something like that happened at their get-together, and if I can get permission, I’ll pass it on to you.

Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder