

Willingen II (2002), The 50th Anniversary Congress on “Missio Dei” [Latin for God’s Own Mission]

Crossings Colleagues,

Just last week, Aug. 18-21, Marie and I participated in “Willingen II,” the 50th Anniversary Congress on “Missio Dei” [Latin for God’s Own Mission]. Exactly 50 years ago in Willingen, a small German town in Hesse, the International Missionary Council from 40-some countries gathered for the first post-WW II international gathering on Christian Missions. Curiously enough the final statement of Willingen I in 1952 didn’t use the term “missio Dei,” but focused its rhetoric on “the mission of the Triune God.” But some reporter, so we were told (probably a German!), used the Latin term in place of “the mission of the Triune God,” and it stuck. Missio Dei has been the shibboleth in mission rhetoric ever since. Willingen II promotional material called participants to reexamine the term focusing on

- a. what it means,
- b. how it’s been used in the intervening half century (for good or ill) and
- c. what its promise is for Christian mission in the 3rd millennium.

Major presentations and presenters were:

1. Understanding and Misunderstanding of Missio Dei in European Churches and Missiology (T. Engelsviken, Norway)

2. Missio Dei in Practice: The Struggle for Liberation, Dignity and Justice in African Societies (K. Nuernberger, South Africa)
3. The History and Importance of World Mission Conferences in the 20th Century (W. Guenther, Germany)
4. Missio Dei – Its Unfolding and Limitations in the Korean Context (S. Chai, South Korea)
5. Missio Dei – The Poor as Mediators of the Kingdom of God and Subjects of the Church (P. Suess, Brazil)
6. Missio Dei Today – Identity of Christian Mission (T. Sundermeier, Germany)

There were discussion possibilities—in plenum and in smaller groups—throughout the program. Unhappily, because of the early departure of our plane home from Frankfurt, we missed the concluding discussion and wrap-up sessions. So my comments below are based on incomplete data. Another lacuna is that none of the major papers were distributed to the participants, so I have only my scribbled notes to jog my memory.

Even so, it seems to me that Willingen II was a mixed bag. It was great on historical reportage and analysis, but it didn't break new ground. Perhaps the planners organized that way. If so, table conversation showed that I wasn't the only one of the 132 attendees from 21 countries who had hoped for more. Perhaps that Willingen II would palpably “move” beyond the retrospective and the reportorial, to what that marvelous German word “aktuell” means, i.e., “relevant to the current situation.” Topics such as Missio Dei [MD] and the Muslim-conscious World after 9/11; or MD in today's de-Christianized western world, a “mission field” if there ever was one; or even just MD vis-a-vis the horrendous Elbe-flood that dominated the TV during our time in Willingen.

Disappointing for me were some “real absences.”

Absence of any theological examination of *Missio Dei* as a valid term for mission reflection at all. One colleague pooh-poohed the term at Kaffeeklatsch. "Mission entails a sender. If God has a mission, who sends him? Clearly God in Christ's commissioning sends us disciples as his ambassadors. But that means we are on mission assignment. What is gained by calling it MD?" In some of the retrospective parts of the program it was noted that seeing mission activity to be the "mission of the Triune God," the actual rhetoric of Willingen I, it was a move away from focusing on the "church's" mission and seeing it as God's own. But once again, what is the concrete benefit of that terminological shift?

As I understand it, Willingen I articulated the "mission of the Triune God" as God's salvation project for the world with "God the sender, Jesus the Christ the one sent, and the Holy Spirit now keeping God's mission going through history." But even here, solid as that sounds, "cui bono"? Who benefits from that re-focusing and what is that benefit? Seems to me that an answer to that might begin by noting that the Trinitarian formulation for God-talk is not first of all "the plain truth about the true God." It is rather the Good News Truth about the true God, God-talk that comes out Gospel. But here I'm already invoking some of the "Augsburg Aha!" that you readers know from previous postings. The mission of God-as-Gospel, is distinct and different from other "missions" that God (the same God) is carrying out in our world. There is a difference between God's left-hand mission in our world and God's right-hand mission. More than one New Testament writer calls that to our attention, pointing out that at the extreme these two missions of the one God are as different as death and life. Although that perspective never surfaced in the plenary papers, you can guess who tried to bring it to the mike in the subsequent discussion.

Throughout there was a "real absence," seems to me, of any

explicit use of Lutheran theology, even from the Lutheran speakers (4 of the 6). [Speaker Chai from Korea is Presbyterian and Suess from Brazil Roman Catholic.] I am not hyping Lutheran theology because it happens to be mine, but because of the alternate hermeneutic it offers for God's word and God's work in the world. More on that below. It's not that the Lutheran speakers denied their Lutheran heritage. They more often ignored it, focusing their message mostly on the ecumenical "party line" that Missio Dei includes both explicit evangelism and social action. Thus any radical polarization between the social action emphasis of World Council of Churches ecumenism, on the one hand, and the evangelization emphasis of Lausanne-linked evangelicals is a no-no. But isn't that a ho-hum? How do you get from there to the "aktuell" stuff calling for Christian mission surrounding us everywhere?

Some of my thoughts about Missio Dei—

1. The current use of the concept (which may not be what Willingen I intended) across the missiological spectrum — from Mennonites and Evangelicals to Mainline Protestants and Roman Catholics — sees God's mission to be all the good things God is doing in and for the world, with Jesus the Christ as God's grand finale in that mission. Christians thus are called to "join in God's mission" with its accents on peace, justice, wholeness of human life and care for the environment — along with salvation for sinners. Important for Lutheran perceptions is to note that there is no fundamental distinction between God's salvation agenda in Christ and all the other good things — care and preservation — that God is doing throughout creation. It is finally a "unitary" vision of Missio Dei. There is no paradox, no tension, between any parts of God's work in the world. If God is ambidextrous, he's playing the same game with both hands.

2. It is therefore no surprise that such a unitary vision of Missio Dei – a big package of all the good things God is doing – pushes Luther to the sidelines. For Luther's basic claim is that God has TWO missions in the world and that all God's work, even all of God's "good" work, cannot be brought under a single rubric. Luther reads the Scriptures proclaiming that God operates ambidextrously – left hand and right hand – and that these two operations are quite different. One classic text for this is 2 Cor. 3 where the apostle distinguishes the serious differences between God's two ministries (Greek: diakoniai), God's two covenants or dispensations (Greek: diathekai). Those two Greek terms are the closest NT words we have for mission—and in using those terms, the apostle says God pursues two missions, not just one, in the world. Mission theology drawing on such a left-hand/right-hand distinction in God's work is unknown, as far as I know, in today's missiology.
3. Today's regnant missiological paradigm built on such unitary Missio Dei theology envisions mission practice as follows: to seek out the good and godly elements, God's "grace," already revealed among a given people before the Christian gospel ever gets there. When that data is in hand the mission-task then is to link God's Grace-revelation-in-Christ to the Grace-of-God that people have already encountered in their lives. Mission does bring something new, but not qualitatively new. "When the missionaries arrived, they found that God was already there graciously working among the people." That is one way such mission theology gets expressed nowadays, for example in my church, the ELCA.
4. Luther would ask: "Which God was already working there? God-hidden or God-revealed?" Better expressed, since Luther is a Biblical monotheist: "The one and only God was

already there, but in which format? Hidden or revealed?" And if the people did not already have "the merits and benefits of Christ" in the faith they confessed, that would answer the question.

5. The Missio Dei notion just described builds implicitly (even if unconsciously) on the medieval scholastic axiom: *Gratia non tollit naturam, sed perfecit*. [God's] grace does not abolish nature, but perfects it. No surprise, Roman Catholic speaker Paulo Suess drew explicitly on this axiom for his presentation [see #5 above]. The Lutheran Reformation rejected that axiom for Christian theology and replaced it with a law/promise hermeneutic for reading the scriptures, and a corollary left-hand/right-hand hermeneutic for reading the world. That two-phase hermeneutic grounds Lutheran missiology in relating the Word to the world. My attempt to engage Paulo on this point in the plenary session didn't seem to go anywhere, but later a Reformed missiologist from Holland sought to comfort me with the words: "You're making converts."
6. Thus God's manifold works in creation, the first creation – good and godly though they surely are – are distinctly different from what God is doing in Christ, God's new creation. When once commenting on Paul's vocabulary in the Epistle to the Romans Luther notes that Paul differentiates God's GRACE and GIFTS. All the goodies of creation are God's good gifts (e.g., Luther's listing of them in the Small Catechism on the Creed's first article), but not (yet) God's grace, the "grace of our Lord Jesus Christ."
7. One of Luther's favored terms for God at work in the world apart from Christ is *deus absconditus* (God hidden). He uses this term with several different nuances. In all of them, however, God's hiddenness does not mean that there is no evidence of God at all. *Deus absconditus* is a

revealer. Theistic evidence abounds. But in that abundant evidence a fundamental aspect of God remains un-revealed – specifically the God-data needed “for us and for our salvation.” The paper I offered at the Luther Congress two weeks before sought to do missiology from this distinction between God-hidden and God-revealed. I hope to tell you about that next week.

Summa:

The agenda of Christian mission is to move people from a faith and life linked to the hidden-God to a faith and life trusting God-in-Christ. Is that the church’s mission or the mission of the Triune God? Answer: Yes. Central to this is that the turf which such Christian mission addresses is first and foremost our relationship with God. Any concern with the world’s crying need for peace, justice, wholeness of human life and care for the environment that bypasses this primal agenda doesn’t come under the rubric of the mission mandate of the Triune God. Those agendas are admittedly good and godly, but they are God’s left-hand agendas, and we are called as God’s agents to carry them out. However, what God is up to in Jesus Christ is something else. To use Luke’s version of Christ’s great commission: “That repentance and the forgiveness of sins be proclaimed in his name.”

Peace and Joy
Ed Schroeder.