
What Does It Mean To Be a Lutheran in Social Ministry?

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This paper was prepared for a think tank on Lutheran identity conducted under auspices of Lutheran Service in America.

In preparing for this event we were asked to reflect on two questions:

1. What are the unique Lutheran accents in Christian theology that inform our ministry of caring for the needs of our neighbors?
2. What are some of the issues and concerns that boards of Lutheran SMOs ought to pay attention to if they are to ensure that the ministry of the agency is faithful to the Gospel, the Lutheran tradition and their church?

These questions are indeed vital, as you well know. Jim Schlie of Lutheran Services in America's OASIS lists these traits of SMOs at risk:

1. Limited guidance
2. Financial pressures
3. Isolation
4. Poor media interaction
5. Breakdown of extended entities
6. Board/staff conflict
7. Limited intra-staff communication
8. Lack of commitment to be a team
9. Loss of spiritual identity

By contrast, healthy SMO traits include:

1. Communicate/listen
2. Affirm and support
3. Respect and trust
4. Balanced interaction
5. Shared vision of ministry
6. Seek help with problems
7. Priority of service
8. Staff interaction valued
9. Knowledge of right/wrong
10. Integrate humor
11. Shared responsibilities
12. Honor traditions and rituals

As I examine these lists, I note that most indicators are in the ethical/relational/managerial realm. While it is certainly possible for social service agencies to be successful in these left-hand kingdom matters quite without spiritual identity, I think we would all agree that clarity and health in Lutheran spiritual identity is in every way an advantage, indeed a catalyst toward all the healthy SMO traits. Thus there is a very fundamental and mainly pragmatic advantage for Lutheran SMOs to happily claim their Lutheran identity. However, beyond the pragmatic level, and much more fundamental to the very being of the church and our agencies, is the divine vocation of the church to be in the world, serving the needy, bringing the balm of the Gospel for healing body and soul. Why does the Lutheran Church create and retain such agencies? Is there something deeper than command that propels the church in this area particularly when the church and SMO are healthy? Is there something more to the uniqueness of Lutheran social ministry than ethics, even uniquely Lutheran ethics? I believe there is.

I've decided to do something fairly radical in this paper. I have turned to a document Luther wrote in 1539. In "On the Councils and the Church" Luther laid out the fruit of his extensive study of the ecumenical councils of the early centuries of the church. He had given his hope of a "free, general" council to address the religious problems of the western church. Meanwhile, the Council

of Trent (with its radical rejection of the Lutheran Reformation) was looming, and indeed would begin in 1545, the year before his death. What attracted me to this document was the last section where Luther presented seven “marks” that enable a “poor confused person [to] tell where such Christian holy people are to be found in this world.”¹ In his brief introductory excursus to this section of the document, the words of the “children’s creed” (*sancta ecclesia catholica*—“holy catholic church”) propel Luther into a discussion of Christian holiness. Because God sanctifies them, they

give and help wherever they can. Thus they do not lie, deceive, and backbite, but are kind, truthful, and trustworthy, and do whatever else the commandments of God prescribe. That is the work of the Holy Spirit, who sanctifies and also awakens the body to such a new life until it is perfected in the life beyond. That is what is called “Christian holiness.”²

Yet precisely this lived holiness of Christians is not included by Luther among the marks of the church’s existence. This is certainly consistent with the Augsburg Confession.³ Ethics, then, are not uniquely fundamental to the Lutheran Church’s being, nor, I would add, to the being of our social ministry organizations, or more precisely to their being Lutheran SMOs. As undeniably important as all the managerial/ethical/relational aspects are for healthy Lutheran SMOs, it is not, cannot be, these that finally identify our institutions as Lutheran and Christian.

Our agencies are Lutheran and Christian to the extent that that which makes the church the church has free course in their midst. I do not assert that these institutions are simply “church.” They are not. But I do believe our institutions of mercy are and must be “churchly.” Thus, what defines the Lutheran church as such must have free course with these institutions. This is a very vital point. For there is widespread confusion within the Lutheran institution community on precisely what “Lutheran” or “Christian” identity means. Some argue that our institutions must cease to be concerned about being “Lutheran” (for that battle—allegedly—was fought and lost long ago). Now the task, so it is asserted, is for them to simply

be “Christian.” Yet, unfortunately, it would appear that those who would make this argument most intensely define “Christian” more in terms of ethics than anything else. But let me state something rather radical: Ethics are not what constitute, define, or mark something as Christian. In fact, you may be surprised to learn that not one of Jesus’ ethical assertions was unique to him. Not “Love your enemy as yourself,” not the idea of self-sacrifice, not “judge not lest ye be judged.” None of it. All these ethical prescriptions are found in other ancient sources. Thus a Lutheran institution may well emphasize, advertise, enshrine in its mission statements, ethical assertions about caring for all, equal value of all who receive care, etc. But these assertions (true as they may or need be) are not what defines the institution as Lutheran, or even Christian. What is “Lutheran” must be defined most simply and clearly by the Small Catechism. And what does the Catechism purport to be? Luther simply defined it as a summary of the basics every Christian needed to know to be a Christian. The six chief parts are very simple: 1. Ten Commandments; 2. Creed; 3. Lord’s Prayer; 4. Baptism; 5. Confession and Absolution; 6. Lord’s Supper. An institution is Lutheran to the extent that these simple truths of the Christian faith are acknowledged and venerated.

Now some will retort that this is a ridiculous level of complexity. Really? All that is being requested is that we view our task from the perspectives of the very basics of the Christian faith! If an individual is unable or unwilling to consider what these basics mean for the church’s life of mercy, then that individual is not qualified for leadership in a churchly institution. And if an institution is not concerned with these divine verities, it simply has no right to claim association with the Lutheran Church.

Others will retort that an attempt to evaluate churchly institutions on the basis of the Catechism is a hopelessly sectarian endeavor in a day and age when many of our institutions do not employ a majority of Lutheran workers, may not have a Lutheran CEO, and certainly don’t limit service to Lutheran clients. Yet I should like to respond: What precisely does “ecumenical” mean? If ecumenical means simply that the religious content and context of the institution’s life is defined by tolerance, or a “lowest common denominator” approach to religious issues, then perhaps the argument of ecumenism would somehow justify such an

approach. But I suggest something different. We might do well to define “ecumenical” as precisely what is clearly confessed as fundamental to the faith in the New Testament, and what is most commonly shared throughout the Christian world. In this sense, nothing could be more ecumenical than the Small Catechism’s six chief parts! Furthermore, it is the fundamental assertion of Lutheranism that salvation is found where Jesus’ Word and His means of grace are present—or more precisely, to the very extent that these are present. Thus Lutheranism never asserted that salvation was to be found only within Lutheranism. And NO conservative Lutheran church body ever asserted anything different in this country. But Lutheranism has always asserted that the Lutheran confession of the faith is simply Christianity in the best sense of the word! Again, if a Lutheran cannot make this basic assertion, then I cannot conceive of how such an individual is capable of leading a Lutheran institution that takes the issue of its churchly identity seriously.

It is not only possible, but it is required, that convinced Lutherans lead agencies that serve the broad spectrum of humanity (far beyond the bounds of the Lutheran faith) with kindness, grace, love and conviction. Such conviction does not mean coercion. It does not mean forcing religious views upon others. It does not mean failing to respect the convictions of others—though they may be quite different from our own; people of conviction respect people of conviction. It does mean proudly bearing the name Lutheran. It does mean struggling constantly with the line between church and state and all the issues related to government funding. It does mean making difficult decisions about the faith life of the community of care, and taking concrete steps to see that the basic truths of the catechism are not only not diminished in the life of the community, but promoted. This little paper is a work to consider these things.

What is “Lutheran?” We turn to Luther. After the previous diatribe about the Catechism, I should perhaps have used the six chief parts to begin this section. But that part of this paper was written at a stage in the revisions where I had already completed much of what follows. In “On the Councils and the Church” Luther really provides us with the content of the catechism in a form perhaps even more helpful for the topic of this paper. It is,

after all, a paper about Lutheran identity. Luther provides seven “marks” of the church in the document under consideration:

1. The Word of God
2. Baptism
3. Sacrament of the Altar
4. Office of the Keys
5. Office of the Ministry
6. Prayer and Worship
7. The Holy Cross.

Regarding each of these we shall take note of a few furtive comments by Luther, and then make a few observations directly pertinent to our topic.

1. *First, the holy Christian people are recognized by their possession of the Holy Word of God. To be sure, not all have it in equal measure, as St. Paul says [1 Cor. 3:12-14]. Some possess the Word in its complete purity, others do not. Those who have the pure Word are called those who “build on the foundation with gold, silver, and precious stones.” Those who do not have it in its purity are the ones who “build on the foundation with wood, hay, and straw” and yet will be saved through fire. This is the principal item, and the holiest of holy possessions [Heiligthum, i.e., relic], by reason of which the Christian people are called holy; for God’s Word is holy and sanctifies everything it touches; it is indeed the very holiness of God [Rom. 1:16]. This holy possession is the true holy possession, the true ointment that anoints unto life eternal. We are speaking of the external Word, preached orally by men like you and me, for this is what Christ left behind as an external sign, by which his church or his Christian people in the world should be recognized. It is sincerely believed and openly professed before the world, as Christ says, “Every one who acknowledges me before men, I also will acknowledge before my Father and his angels” [Matt. 10:32]. There are many who know it in their hearts but do not profess it openly. The number of those who believe in and act by it is small. Wherever you hear or see this Word preached, believed, professed and lived, do not doubt that the true ecclesia sancta*

catholica, "A Christian holy people" must be there, even though their number is very small. For God's Word shall not return void [Is. 55]. For God's Word cannot be without God's people, and conversely, God's people cannot be without God's Word.

In Lutheran institutions, the Word of God has full sway. And this Word "sanctifies everything it touches." In Lutheran institutions, Lutheran Christianity and the Word of God are more than mere suppositions, quietly acted upon. Where the Word of God is, it is "preached, believed, professed and lived." This means that there is an intimate connection between pulpit/congregation and SMO. Lutheran SMOs will take advantage of every opportunity to have Lutheran pastors proclaim the Word of God in their midst, and provide every opportunity for the Word of God to influence every aspect of its program. Lutheran SMOs are very cautious about entering into funding arrangements that limit the free course of the Word of God and its ability to "sanctify" the entire program. Lutheran institutions will be at once ecumenical and confessional. While clearly and joyfully acknowledging the comforting truth that wherever the Word of God is found, it creates "a Christian holy people," Lutheran SMOs must clearly acknowledge the fact that the Word does not have full sway everywhere. Within reasonable bounds, often prescribed by law, and respecting the rights of the individuals served, Lutheran institutions will expose clients to the clear balm of the precious and healing Gospel, as proclaimed and taught by Lutherans based upon the Bible as interpreted by the Small Catechism. Lutheran SMOs will be very selective and discerning regarding who is invited to provide religious counsel, instruction, worship and education to clients served. A Lutheran nursing home, for instance, may allow an evangelical or fundamentalist or Roman Catholic priest to conduct services. However, these will serve clients of that conviction, rather than being opportunities for "activity or entertainment" wheeling everyone available and unable to resist to "chapel." Respecting the rights of individual clients and their families, un-churched individuals will be exposed to the blessed Word of God whenever possible.

Among the staff, the Word of God must have full sway. This means that employing pious Lutherans as SMO leaders is critically

important. This is crucial if an institution is going to have any real Lutheran ethos. By “Lutheran ethos” I mean a reality permeated with the Gospel and the doctrine of justification by grace through faith (not legalism or moralism, nor merely a post-modern-pseudo-doctrine of justification, namely, absolute tolerance). A Lutheran ethos is baptismal (sins are confessed and forgiven). A Lutheran ethos is incarnational. Christ comes as a man in the flesh, speaking and acting for mercy, and we look toward the needs of our neighbor as the hands, feet and mouth of Christ. A Lutheran ethos delights in vocation. That is, each staff member is appreciated as a vital part of the whole, with a holy task, wholly sanctified by the Gospel. A Lutheran ethos respects the authority of the state and the legal rights of clients (particularly children). A CEO may have all the requisite abilities, board members may have all the necessary diversity of experience and insight, but to the extent they are not regularly exposed to Lutheran altars and pulpits, and to the Word of God publicly and privately, to that extent the SMO jeopardizes its sacred mandate and task as a Lutheran Christian haven for mercy in this world.

To the extent legally possible, Lutheran institutions will hire Lutheran professional and non-professional individuals. To the extent that is not possible, they will hire pious Christians, particularly those least prone to be uncomfortable with the larger Lutheran ethos. All staff will be encouraged to develop personal piety, and occasional time will be provided, before, during or after the workday, for serious meditation on the Word of God.

Lutheran SMOs will invite pastors and theologians to reflect upon crucial issues. Such people will be invited into the institutions to provide “in service” opportunities for growth, so that all employees (Lutheran and non-) may better understand the ethos of the institution and their role in that reality.

Lutheran SMOs will respect and use the array of medical, psychological and social professions as good First Article gifts of God. However, they will have clear ideas of the limits of such professions and professionals within the bounds of what is acceptable according to the Word of God (Holy Scripture).

2. *God's people or the Christian holy people are recognized by the Holy Sacrament of baptism, whether it is taught, believed and*

administered correctly according to Christ's ordinance. That too is a public sign and a precious, holy possession by which God's people are sanctified. Wherever you see this sign you may know that the church, or the holy Christian people, must surely be present. Indeed, you should not even pay attention to who baptizes, for baptism does not belong to the baptizer, nor is it given to him, but it belongs to the baptized. It was ordained for him by God, and given to him by God.

Lutheran institutions of mercy will give Holy Baptism and its significance a place of high honor. Holy Baptism teaches us that all people are sinners, and the sins of all have been paid for on Calvary. Because Christ died for all, all people, (Christian or not), are valued as precious—worth the very blood of Christ. Holy Baptism connects believers with Christ, and by virtue of that, with one another (Lutheran or not). In Holy Baptism, we are in fact clothed with Christ, made one with Him (Romans 6), and made partakers of His death and resurrection. How we live with and treat one another now either reflects or denies this reality.

Baptism is the sacred foundation for the valuation of the myriad vocations at work within our SMOs. It is the basis for much of our workplace ethics. Management will go the extra mile to help Christian workers find their productive niche before terminating employment. Management will treat non-Christian employees with dignity, honor and love, as a witness to the blessed love of Christ, and to their own value as God's own creation. Clients will be treated with the value due Christ himself (by virtue of baptism: "Whatsoever you have done..." Matthew 25). Management will lead in exemplifying the cycle of the baptized life by participating in confession and absolution in their respective parishes, but they will also be examples to the staff of being willing to admit mistakes and to seek forgiveness from those wronged (so far as the wretched reality of potential litigation allows). Conflict management and resolution plans will employ explicitly Christian elements, and as far as possible, be based upon the reality of Holy Baptism, and return to it confession and absolution.

Lutheran institutions will acknowledge and respect the necessity of Holy Baptism for eternal life ("unless a person is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of

heaven.” John 3), and its unsurpassed consolation for children, the downtrodden and the needy. Lutheran institutions of mercy will provide every opportunity and encouragement (within the reasonable bounds of civil law) for individuals to be baptized, remembering always that people follow conviction, not coercion. Where appropriate, all staff (particularly health and critical care staff) will be familiar with the rite of emergency baptism provided in the hymnal and Catechism, as well as procedure to contact appropriate clergy. Lutheran SMOs will develop and maintain open and cordial professional relationships with area Lutheran and non-Lutheran clergy, happy to respond to patient/client inquiry regarding baptism and/or instruction in the faith. Priority will be given to Lutheranism in cases where the individual has no preferred church membership.

Insofar as the “priesthood of the baptized” flows from the font, and insofar as is allowable by circumstance, type of care, etc., those served will be encouraged to exercise this spiritual priesthood in service to each other—however that service may look. (“Therefore offer yourselves as living sacrifices.” Romans 12) Every effort will be made to connect local Christians, especially local Lutheran Christians, with the work of mercy and care, and its recipients, as a reflection of the reality of the body of Christ brought about in Holy Baptism.

- 3. God’s people, or Christian holy people, are recognized by the holy sacrament of the altar, wherever it is rightly administered, believed and received, according to Christ’s institution. This too is a public sign and a precious, holy possession left behind by Christ by which His people are sanctified so that they also exercise themselves in faith and openly confess that they are Christian, just as they do with the Word and with baptism. In addition, the question of whether you are male or female, young or old, need not be argued—just as it matters little in baptism and the preached Word. It is enough that you are consecrated and anointed with the sublime and holy chrism of God, with the Word of God, with baptism, and also this sacrament; then you are anointed highly and gloriously enough and sufficiently vested with priestly garments. Wherever you see this sacrament properly administered there you may be assured of the presence*

of God's people. For, as was said above of the Word, wherever God's Word is, there the church must be; likewise, wherever baptism and the sacrament are, God's people must be, and vice versa. No others have, give, practice, use and confess these holy possessions save God's people alone.

There is no more powerful source and motivation for Lutheran churches to be involved in the work of mercy and care than the Sacrament of the Altar. Thus Luther writes:

This fellowship is of such a nature that all the spiritual possessions of Christ and His saints are imparted and communicated to him who receives this sacrament; again, all his sufferings and sins are communicated to them, and thus love engenders love and unites all... the members have a care for one another; whether one member suffer, all the members suffer with it (Treatise on the Blessed Sac., Phil. Ed. II, p. 1).

In this sacrament, therefore, God Himself gives through the priest a sure sign to man, to show that, in like manner, he shall be united with Christ and His saints and have all things in common with them; that Christ's sufferings and life shall be his own, together with the lives and sufferings of all the saints, so that whoever does him an injury does injury to Christ and all the saints, as he says by the prophet, "He that toucheth you toucheth the apple of My eye"; and on the other hand, whoever does a kindness does it to Christ and all His Saints, as He says, "What you have done unto one of the least of these My brethren, that ye have done unto Me" (Treatise on the Blessed Sac., p. 12).

Lutheran congregations will be encouraged and taught to view their respective SMOs as extensions of the life drawn from their altars. Lutheran SMOs will view themselves as such extensions of Christ's love. Parishes will be regularly invited to remember the SMOs in prayer at the celebration of Eucharist and to remember the weak, the downtrodden, the needy, the addicted, etc. Wherever possible, Lutheran SMOs will be located near a Lutheran congregation, and staff be invited for weekday Eucharist before or after work hours. Lutheran institutions will

respect the boundaries of altar fellowship with respect to those communions that place limits upon participation in the Eucharist (including the ELCA—all baptized; and the LCMS—members of the same, except in exceptional circumstances; Rome, etc.).

Like Holy Baptism, Lutheran theology finds in the Holy Supper the greatest motivation for merciful service of the fellow Lutheran Christian, Christian in general, and non-Christian. The Lord's very body and blood unites the participant with all who receive the same body and blood at altars where this reality is confessed and believed. Thus partaking, such Christians become ever more what they have received, the Body of Christ. The forgiveness, grace and mercy received at the altar is the sweetest Gospel motivation to live toward others in forgiveness, grace and mercy.

4. *God's people or holy Christians are recognized by the office of the keys exercised publicly. That is, as Christ decrees in Matthew 18 [15-20], if a Christian sins, he should be reprov'd; and if he does not mend his ways, he should be bound in his sin and cast out. That is the office of the keys. Now the use of the keys is twofold, public and private. There are some people with consciences so tender and despairing that even if they have not been publicly condemned, they cannot find comfort until they have been individually absolved by the pastor. On the other hand, there are also some who are so obdurate that they neither recant in their heart and want their sins forgiven individually by the pastor, nor desist from their sins. Therefore the keys must be used differently publicly and privately. Now where you see sins forgiven or reprov'd in some persons, be it publicly or privately, you may know that God's people are there. If God's people are not there, the keys are not there either; and if the keys are not present for Christ, God's people are not present.*

In Lutheran SMOs, despite the mountains of regulation, legal concerns, etc., the Gospel must reign. Amid the myriad left-hand responsibilities, the Gospel and Christ's forgiveness must not be suppressed. Lutheran SMO leaders and staff will have a deep sense of their own sinfulness, and find great consolation in confession and absolution, participating in it weekly in their own parishes. To the extent that our institutions are in fact Lutheran

and Christian, they will make use of confession and absolution in periods of interpersonal difficulty. As much as possible, they will use confession and absolution even in cases where separation has been necessary. Because sin is a reality in all of our lives and thus in our institutional lives, the remedy for sin must also be turned loose and found within these institutions, and among those they serve. Medical and psychological experts, physical therapists, indeed all who deal with individual and family matters, will realize that while the assistance they provide is of fundamental benefit to those in need, the crown of such assistance is to provide hurting individuals with the opportunity for self evaluation, recognition of sin and absolution, whether spoken privately by a staff professional, and or in directing such individuals to pastoral care. If our concern for individuals is indeed holistic, we must return, where it has waned, to a concern for spiritual wholeness.

- 5. The church is recognized externally by the fact that it consecrates or calls ministers, or has offices that it is to administer. There must be bishops, pastors or preachers who publicly and privately give, administer and use the aforementioned four things that are holy possessions in behalf of and in the name of the church, or rather by reason of their institution by Christ, as St. Paul states in Ephesians 4:8, "He received gifts among men." The people as a whole cannot do these things, but must entrust or have them entrusted to one person. Otherwise, what would happen if everyone wanted to speak or administer, and no one wanted to give way to the other? Wherever you see this done, be assured that God's people, the holy Christian people, are present.*

In Lutheran institutions, clergy are highly respected and valued. The proper and natural love and respect that so often develops over the period of service must always be seen in light of the office that the clergy bear. That office is a Gospel office, given to dispense the gifts that bring eternal life. Lutheran clergy will be expected to celebrate the sacrament often in the institution. Clergy are integral to the institution's mission to the extent that the aforementioned "marks" are integral to the institution. Institutions will make every effort to employ Lutheran clergy who have additional expertise in spiritual care or the myriad of possible diakonic vocations.

Not unlike the seven “deacons” who were ordained to care for the need of the widows in Acts 6, so also it is quite appropriate for clergy to be called to administrative and diakonic tasks within an institution. Such tasks (like the deacons of Acts 6) may well combine aspects of the standard office of the ministry (preaching the Word, administering the Means of Grace) with diakonic tasks. Lutheran institutions will value theological training and insight, and make every effort to employ clergy with particular diakonic gifts. They will provide every opportunity for clergy to gain such training and skills that would allow for leadership in the diakonic realm. It concerns me that the number of clergy who are currently leading Lutheran SMOs is ever declining. The complexities—particularly financial, legal and regulatory—have driven many institutions to hire business experts for CEO positions. Where this is the case, the organization structure needs to be adjusted so that clear guidance can be had regarding the issues of Lutheran ethos. As a church body we must make every effort to provide opportunities for business professionals to acquire a theological education, and for clergy to be prepared to administer complex institutions.

6. *The holy Christian people are externally recognized by prayer, public praise and thanksgiving to God. Where you see and hear the Lord's Prayer prayed and taught; or psalms or other spiritual songs sung, in accordance with the Word of God and the true faith; also the creed, the Ten Commandments, and the Catechism used in public, you may rest assured that a holy Christian people of God are present. For prayer too is one of the precious holy possessions whereby everything is sanctified, as St. Paul says [1 Tim. 4:5].*

Lutheran institutions will have vibrant connections to, or be in and of themselves, worshiping communities. A very unfortunate byproduct of our currently boomer-driven society is that traditional forms and institutions tend to be rejected by boomers (I'm one of them!), who are quite certain that such forms are of little value. I served a parish in Indiana's poorest census tract for six years. That parish enjoyed daily chapel in its sanctuary. Matins was chanted four days a week, and the Lord's Supper was celebrated every Wednesday by the entire community. The parochial school of 100-plus children and teachers gathered every morning. The

regular pattern of worship followed the church year closely. The appropriate texts were always used. The children had memorized dozens of hymns, psalms, introits, etc. The catechism was recited every Tuesday and a homily given on the catechism of the day. The Bible story explaining that bit of the catechism was the text for Tuesdays. The children later learn to sing morning prayer. They knew two different versions of the “Te Deum” by heart. The pastors vested daily. A visit by a Synod official on one occasion brought pointed derision. He was an older boomer. By comparison, the chapel life of the Synod headquarters is stark. These 100 or so inner-city black children, more than half from broken homes, thrived on a daily spiritual fare with a good 10 times the complexity, depth and substance of that of the headquarters.

Why do I make this point? Much of the benefit of the churchly rhythm of prayer, liturgy and worship, including traditional texts, is missed by the generation that demographics currently put in most institutional leadership positions. By contrast, many of those who are weak and suffering and need the services of Lutheran institutions do not share this aversion (particularly the elderly and many others suffering the chaos of urban existence, etc.). Our institutions must become places of rich reliance on Christian texts.

Not long ago I visited a state-of-the-art preschool operated by a Lutheran SMO. It was impressive in every way, except one. There was not a single Christian book or piece of art in the entire facility. I could not “rest assured that a holy Christian people of God were present.”

- 7. The Holy Christian people are externally recognized by the holy possession of the sacred cross. They must endure every misfortune and persecution, all kinds of trials and evil from the devil, the world and the flesh (as the Lord's Prayer indicates) by inward sadness, timidity, fear, outward poverty, contempt, illness and weakness in order to become like their head, Christ. And the only reason they must suffer is that they steadfastly adhere to Christ and God's Word, enduring this for the sake of Christ, Matthew 5, "Blessed are you when men persecute you on my account." They must be pious, quiet, obedient and prepared to serve the government and everybody with life and goods, doing no one any harm. No people on earth have to endure such bitter hate.*

This too is a holy possession whereby the Holy Spirit not only sanctifies His people, but also blesses them.

In short, being Lutheran in social ministry means bearing the cross. This is particularly so in the current budget climate (2003). Yet as Lutheran institutions do their best to act in faith (with wisdom and care), they can be assured that indeed, “all things work together for good.” More than that, as SMOs struggle with funding, state regulations, grantors, constituents, congregations, denominational requirements and a myriad of other challenges, which often bring “inward sadness, timidity, fear, outward poverty, contempt, illness and weakness,” these all—when suffered in faith in Christ—drive us to Christ and His Word for consolation and strength. And in this very struggle SMOs find that they become much more like, and able to identify with, the weak whom they serve, and even more importantly, with Christ, whom they serve in and through the weak (Matthew 25).

I pray these thoughts are of some value. There are many generalizations. I fully realize the vast array of circumstances our SMOs face is enormous. There is no “one size fits all” approach. But what I desire is that, by thinking about such things, the SMO leaders will give more penetrating thought to, and consideration of, just what it means to be a Lutheran social ministry organization.

Notes

¹ *Martin Luther's Basic Theological Writings*, ed. Timothy Lull (Minneapolis: Fortress) 1999, p. 545. The treatise is also found in *Luther's Works* vol. 41.

² *Op. cit.* p. 543.

³ Augsburg Confession Article VII, “The church is the assembly of saints in which the Gospel is taught purely and the sacraments are administered rightly.” *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, ed. Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress), p. 32.