

The *Ablaze!* Initiative in the LCMS Theologically Considered

The central thesis of this paper is that the *Ablaze!* initiative is a 21st century outreach effort consistent with Lutheran theology and practice and an example of the mission emphasis that has characterized The Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod from the beginning.

Mission has been an integral part of the theology and practice of The Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod (LCMS) since its inception. Already in its constitution of 1854, the first chapter gave as “Reasons for Forming a Synodical Organization,”

1. The example of the apostolic church. (Acts 15:1-31)
2. The Lord’s will that the diversities of gifts be used for the common profit. (1 Cor. 12:4-31)
3. The joint extension of the kingdom of God and the establishment and promotion of special church enterprises (seminary, agenda, hymnal, Book of Concord, schoolbooks, Bible distribution, missionary endeavors within and without the church, etc.).¹

As the church makes its plans to go forward with a major emphasis on missions in the 21st century called *Ablaze!*, it is in reality returning to its roots, considering again how the people of God can work together to share the Good News of Jesus with people both near and far.

The most recent LCMS statement on mission was produced by the Synod’s Commission on Theology and Church Relations (CTCR) in 1991. That statement was written in response to a 1986 convention resolution that asked the CTCR to “initiate, facilitate, and develop a theological Statement of Mission” which will “reflect the urgency, vitality, and joy of our historic confession of Christ’s forgiveness by grace alone through faith alone as taught in Scripture alone.” The time has come, said the Synod, “to support more fervently the Biblical mandate to proclaim the scriptural Gospel of Jesus Christ for the life and salvation of people everywhere” (1986 Resolution 3-02; cf. Ephesians 5:16).²

The CTCR’s document, *A Theological Statement of Mission*, was a major statement of mission theology with lasting validity. Divided into eight sections, the Statement created a

. . . theological framework for understanding our place in God’s mission, including

- The basis of our participation, God’s saving work for us in Jesus Christ;

¹ Carl S. Meyer, ed., *Moving Frontiers, Readings in the History of The Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod*. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1964, p. 149.

² Commission on Theology and Church Relations, *A Theological Statement of Mission*. St. Louis: Commission on Theology and Church Relations, 1991, p. 3.

- The nature of our participation, as God’s agents empowered by the Holy Spirit;
- The source of our motivation, God’s love for us and the world.³

In analyzing the contemporary situation, the CTCR “Statement” recognized the traditional connection of the word “mission” with evangelistic outreach and acknowledged additional dimensions of the word as it is used in the modern world with the accompanying risk of that usage.

However, there has been a growing recognition that everything the church does to communicate and demonstrate Christ’s love for the world is an expression of God’s sending and seeking love. At the same time, the word *mission* has increasingly been used to refer to the concern of Christ and his church for the physical and social well-being of individuals and society. This use of the word *mission*, when understood in the context of the proper distinction between Law and Gospel, has Scriptural validity and important implications for the church’s ministry. Yet it raises the question of whether the definition of *mission* might become so all-encompassing that it ultimately means nothing.⁴

While the “Statement” is largely concerned with correctly stating a theology of mission, its secondary purpose was to raise questions that would “help the congregations and organizations of the Synod develop individual mission statements as they apply the theological truths presented in the ‘Statement’ to their own specific settings of mission and ministry.” It noted,

The value of a mission statement is that it expresses an organization’s purpose. It serves to focus the organization’s efforts and to keep its objectives clearly in view as it strives to fulfill its goals. The risk in formulating and presenting a statement of mission in such a context is that the church may be perceived as carrying out its “business” in much the same way as does the world. A statement of mission can easily become a description of what “we” are striving to do and accomplish rather than a statement of what God has done and is doing for, in, and through his church. The Synod’s request for “a theological Statement of Mission” manifests its desire to move forward resolutely and fervently in proclaiming the Gospel so that the lost may be found and God’s people may be empowered for their witness and service.⁵

Completely in agreement with the theology of the CTCR’s statement and mindful of the value of mission statements while at the same time aware of the self-aggrandizing possibilities raised by such statements, LCMS World Mission attempted to carefully craft a mission statement to guide and direct its own activities until 2017, the 500th anniversary of the Reformation. The statement was never intended to be a one-sentence-long statement of theology, but was intended to keep the organization focused

³ *Statement of Mission*, p. 3.

⁴ Theological Statement, p 4.

⁵ Theological Statement, p. 4.

on the task of leading the people of the LCMS to share the Good News of Jesus with people who had no saving faith. This statement says,

Praying to the Lord of the harvest, LCMS World Mission, in collaboration with its North American and worldwide partners, will share the Good News of Jesus with 100 million unreached or uncommitted people by the 500th anniversary of the Reformation in 2017.

As a shorthand way of talking about this immense task which the leadership of LCMS World Mission believed that God had led them to, staff members began to look for a term that could wrap up these ideas and, at the same time, encourage the congregations and their members to grow in their commitment to the evangelistic task. After much discussion and prayer, LCMS World Mission chose the term “ablaze” (on the reasons for the term “ablaze,” see below), and further deliberations and prayer led to the graphic design for “*Ablaze!*,” so well received in LCMS circles.

The writers of the mission statement had essentially five ideas they wished to communicate.

- Mission begins with God. He is the one who sends his people out in mission. Without his blessing and guidance, nothing will be accomplished. God’s people must turn to him in prayer as they face this immense task.
- The needs of the unbelieving world are far greater than any church body can humanly expect to respond to. God must show us the way to use the resources he has given us if we are to share the Good News with the 100 million unreached or uncommitted people.
- The Reformation restored the Good News of Jesus to its central place in the life of the church. It is a fitting task for the church in our day to respond to the challenge of sharing the Good News of Jesus in a darkening world.
- Mission is too important and the mission task is too immense to be the sole responsibility of the few career missionaries or even the pastors and missionaries of the LCMS. This is not about giving or taking credit for accomplishing the task or even a part of it. The number emphasizes that professional church workers and laity as well as Lutheran churches around the world must work together to accomplish so great a goal.
- As partners in the Gospel from all nations, part of our responsibility is to encourage one another to grow in our zeal to share the Good News of Jesus and to find ways that we can work together to accomplish that task.

As a shorthand way of describing the key activity envisioned by the *Ablaze!* movement, the sharing of the Good News of Jesus with people who have no real faith, the President of the LCMS, Dr. Gerald Kieschnick, proposed that the action be described as **the** critical event. He defined the critical event as “when one Lutheran Christian gives witness about Jesus of the hope that is within him or her to another person so that person may encounter

Christ.”⁶ He emphasized the responsibility of every Christian to take part in the evangelistic task and the importance of each person sharing the faith which he or she has received as a gift from God.

These ideas were presented to the Missouri Synod's convention in 2004 and were overwhelmingly embraced. “Critical event” terminology was explained and used (2004 Resolution 1-05A). Not only did the church accept the goal of attempting to touch the lives of 100 million people with the Good News of Jesus, but it took upon itself additional goals to establish 2,000 new LCMS congregations by 2017 (2004 Resolution 1-05A), to expand cross-cultural work at home and abroad (2004 Resolution 1-01A), and to raise \$100 million to enable the LCMS to carry out the mission work it recognized the need to do (2004 Resolution 1-04). Perhaps the most significant goal of all was the convention's resolution that every LCMS congregation and institution should grow in its understanding of itself as a mission outpost, as a community of believers in the midst of a wilderness of unbelief, prepared to go out into that wilderness to share the life-giving Good News of Jesus (2004 Resolution 1-02).

With these resolutions, the *Ablaze!* initiative changed from a vision held by LCMS World Mission into a commitment to a task that belongs to the entire LCMS. The convention resolutions make it clear that the Synod holds LCMS World Mission accountable for assisting the Synod to reach some of the Synod's *Ablaze!* goals. Nevertheless, the same resolutions make it clear that LCMS World Mission is one of the players in the *Ablaze!* movement with the congregations and their members playing the chief roles.

Why was the term Ablaze! chosen?

Every language, including English, has a number of terms to describe what happens when combustible materials and fire come together. In English, one of the words that describes what happens is “ablaze.” Everyone who speaks English understands this word and can use it, and yet it is a word less frequently used because of its extra measure of dignity and seriousness.

The word “ablaze” is used 11 times by the translators of the New International Version (NIV) Old Testament and once in the NIV New Testament, the most popular English translation in current use. In the English Standard Version (ESV), the version proposed as the basis for the new LCMS lectionary, “ablaze” is used three times in the Old Testament and once in the New Testament. In only one passage (Psalm 83:14), is “ablaze” used to translate the same Hebrew verb in both translations. In fact, “ablaze” is used to translate some (but not all) instances of five different Hebrew verbs and two different Greek verbs in the two translations.⁷

⁶ Joel Isenhower, “Kieschnick: ‘Critical Event’ is key to increases in adult confirmations,” **Reporter Online**, March 2004.

⁷ In the NIV, “ablaze” is used to translate:

בער = “burn, consume;” להט = “blaze up, flame;” יצת = “kindle, burn;” קדח = “be kindled, kindle;” דלק = “burn;” αλω = “light, keep burning, burn, burn up.”

It is clear that “ablaze” is not a part of the central theological vocabulary in either the English translations of the New Testament or the Old Testament, and so the translators have more freedom to decide if the word “ablaze” has the right sound in a particular context.

Yet, there are two features in the use of “ablaze” that make it attractive to those in the LCMS who are encouraging the Synod’s pastors and people to become more involved in outreach to unreached or uncommitted people.

In the first place, “ablaze” is connected with the presence of God. Passages such as Deuteronomy 5:23 and 9:15 make it clear that blazing fire was an important sign of the presence of God. The New Testament uses the same imagery, the most memorable symbol being the tongues of fire resting on the disciples’ heads (Acts 2:3), symbolizing the presence of God the Holy Spirit on the first Christian Pentecost day.

As LCMS World Mission encourages the LCMS to become involved in the *Ablaze!* movement, it affirms that all evangelistic endeavors undertaken by the church are based on and have no meaning apart from the action that God has taken to save his people. Christians can carry light to the world only because Jesus has defeated all the powers of the darkness of sin, death, and the devil, and has said to his followers, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life” (John 8:12).

At the same time, there is a second aspect to the way in which the Greek verb translated “ablaze” in the NIV New Testament is used. The first meaning of the Greek verb (*καίω*) is “to cause to be lighted or to be on fire” or “to cause something to burn so as to be consumed, burned up.”⁸ In addition to the literal ways in which this verb is used, however, it is also used figuratively to describe emotional experience. A particularly clear example of this kind of usage is found in NIV Luke 24:32f: “They asked each other, ‘Were not our hearts burning [alternatively, “ablaze,” an example cited by BDAG lexicon] within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?’ They got up and returned at once to Jerusalem.” The words Jesus had spoken to them on the way had set their hearts ablaze, i.e., awakened in them joy and confidence in what God had done for them through Jesus and aroused in them the desire to bear witness to these great things. The recognition of the enormous gift that every believer receives leads to the determination to share that gift.

Dr. C. F. W. Walther, himself an immigrant and a pastor to immigrants, was the first president of the LCMS. His writings have exerted enormous influence on the LCMS—

In the ESV, “ablaze” is used to translate:

קָרַח = (burning of) anger-- always of God's anger; לָהִט = “blaze up, flame;” ἀνάπτω = kindle, set ablaze.

⁸ Bauer, Danker, Arndt, Gingrich, **Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature**. 3rd ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000, sv *καίω*.

his theological textbooks as well as his essays, sermons, letters, and other documents. His sermons, frequently stemming from mission festivals, apply the public doctrine of the Lutheran church to the necessity for and practice of missions. Walther was a passionate proponent of missions, both at home and abroad, both at a corporate and individual level.

An example from one of Walther's mission festival sermons follows. Following his usual practice, Walther begins with an extended prayer, saying in part,

You Yourself said, "I am come to send fire on the earth; and what will I if it be already kindled?" (Luke 12:49). With these words You meant the fire burning with Your love in hearts that cannot cease speaking of You to poor sinners and that cannot cease calling them to You. But more than 1800 years have passed, and many millions, knowing nothing of You, their Savior, still sit in darkness and in the shadow of death. O Lord, that is not Your fault, but the grave fault of man, also of Your Christendom. Alas, all too soon Christendom has sunk into the sleep of security and carelessness. All too soon it has forgotten its high calling to be a light to them that sit in darkness. O Lord, awaken your sleeping Christendom! Fill it again with ardent love for those who are still without God and without hope in this world. Grant unto Your Christendom that through it the Word may be brought into all lands by great multitudes of evangelists. Yes, arise, Lord, even in this last hour of the world to rescue that which still may be rescued, and count also us worthy of taking part in this most blessed work. . . .⁹

Walther does not use "ablaze," but his burning passion that the lost should hear the Good News of Jesus in all its truth and purity is clearly evident.

At the same time, as one might expect from Walther, the prayer is based on a carefully constructed analysis of the church's mission task. The missionary task begins in the heart of God with his love for the lost. God's intention is that all with faith in him share in this love for the lost and do what they can to call people to him. Unfortunately, individual Christians neglected the task, and indeed, all Christendom has forgotten its responsibility to be concerned for the lost. What, then, is the solution? God must take action to revive the zeal of his people. He does this first of all by reviving "Christendom" so that multitudes of evangelists are sent to people who have not heard the Gospel. Then he prays that individual Lutheran Christians, parts of Christendom, may be motivated to take part in this important work. There is no playing off of the individual believer against the church acting collectively as Christendom or vice versa, but a recognition that both are a part of God's plan for getting his work done in the world. As far as Walther is concerned, Lutheran churches lead to Lutheran mission work, just as Lutheran mission work leads to Lutheran churches.

Where does mission begin?

⁹ C. F. W. Walther, "The Mission Society Established by God," in **The Word of His Grace, Occasional and Festival Sermons**. Translated and edited by the Evangelical Lutheran Synod Translation Committee, Lake Mills, IA: Graphic Publishing Company, Inc., 1978, p 17.

Jesus' first words to any of the disciples after his temptation in the wilderness were, "Come, follow me, and I will make you fishers of men" (Matthew 4:19). With those words, he signaled that his message, "The time has come. The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the Good News" (Mark 1:15) was not simply a call for individual spiritual or moral renewal, but was in fact the beginning of a movement to call people in all of their diversity into the kingdom of God. In the same way, Jesus' final words to his disciples as recorded in Matthew 28:18-20, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you," affirmed that the search for lost people would continue until all nations had the opportunity for baptism in the name of the Triune God and had received instruction preparing them for obedience. The story of Jesus from beginning to end and the story of the church that Jesus created is a story of God's relentless search for those still living in darkness and in the shadow of death.

In reality, this is a continuation of the way in which God has always acted with his people. Beginning with Abram, God has sent his believing people to be a blessing to others.¹⁰ Through the centuries God continued his search for the lost until as the writer to the Hebrews says, "In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son" (NIV Hebrews 1:1-2).

What motivates the followers of Jesus to take part in mission?

The New Testament has many examples of people who considered becoming followers of Jesus because they thought that following Jesus provided an opportunity for some form of self-advancement. These range from the teacher of the law (Matthew 8:19-20) to Simon the magician, convert of Philip (Acts 8:9ff.). It is a part of our fallen human nature that we expect to obtain some advantage from following Jesus. This may also affect our modern conception of the missionary task, i.e., when mission work is done in order to increase the membership of a congregation so that a congregation is richer or more powerful.

Jesus, however, made it very clear from the beginning, that "foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head" (Matthew 8:20). All he promises his followers is ". . . they will lay their hands on you and persecute you, delivering you up to the synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors for my name's sake. This will be your opportunity to bear witness" (ESV Luke 21:12-13).

Already in the Two-Thirds World, converts to Christianity are showing us the truth of Jesus' words. Like the martyrs of old described in Hebrews 11:36-38, they live in situations where they will not receive a single earthly reward and will, in fact, suffer profoundly for their faith in Jesus. Their experience is a reminder of the urgency of

¹⁰ NIV Genesis 12:1-3.

mission work. When Jesus comes again to judge the living and the dead, a return that may take place at any time (Matthew 24:36), some will inherit the heavenly kingdom prepared since the creation of the world (Matthew 25:34) while others will depart into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels (Matthew 25:41). In an age of international terror, Jesus' words, "As long as it is day, we must do the work of him who sent me. Night is coming, when no one can work" (John 9:4), are a constant reminder of the importance of pressing forward in mission while it is still possible to do mission work. In a darkening world the time may come when the opportunities to share the Good News of Jesus will be limited in ways that we can scarcely imagine today.

In Matthew 9, when Jesus saw the crowds, "he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd" (Matthew 9:36). For the followers of Jesus in every time and place, what ultimately happens is that the Spirit works in their hearts and minds so that they see the enormous gift they have received and the poverty of those who have not received the gift of faith. Like the woman who found the lost coin in Jesus' parable, their realization of the value of the treasure leads to the immediate desire to share the Good News with friends and neighbors (Luke 15:8-10).

This teaching of the Lord is not always easily communicated in Lutheran congregations. For better or worse, many Lutheran members have been Lutherans for generations. Faith that was once recognized as a precious treasure has become a taken-for-granted legacy, something that is the personal possession of an individual believer that he can choose to share or not.

Lack of mission zeal is the root problem. Writing in the 19th century, C. F. W. Walther urged the members of the emerging Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod,

For if the entire Christian church is the real mission society which God Himself has established, then all those who ignore mission work and do not care anything for it certainly are not true and living members of the church, that is, not true Christians. They break the oath of allegiance which they have made to Christ at their baptism. They want to carry the keys of the kingdom of heaven in their hands and yet do not want to open heaven to those who are still outside. They want to be spiritual priests and yet not do the work of a priest. They want to be God's wheat, and still are not fruitful grains of wheat. They want to have faith, yet have no love. They have no compassion in their hearts for the distress of the heathen, and thereby show that even though they are baptized, they still have a heathenish heart and that they themselves are in darkness and the shadow of death. They are brothers of Cain and say with him: "Am I my brother's keeper?"¹¹

Walther recognized that many Lutherans would reply, "But we do know something about missions and we are involved." To them, he offered this word of admonition:

¹¹ Walther, "True Mission Society," p. 23.

For how is it that even now, after 1800 years, there are so many millions of blood-bought souls who will walk in pagan blindness? The reason is that the church and we have not done our full duty. Very clearly the Lord says through the prophet Jeremiah in the 23rd chapter of his book, “If they had stood in my counsel and had caused my people to hear my words, then they should have turned them from their evil way and from the evil of their doings.” Therefore, we must think with terror on the Day of Judgment when all the millions of heathen who have died in their sins will arise against the Christians and say: O Holy God, Your judgment against us is indeed just; but here stand the Christians who should have proclaimed to us Your counsel for our salvation, or could have *provided* for it, but they did not do it. O Lord, judge between us and them.

Dear brothers and sisters, let us think, really think of this today and humble ourselves before the Lord, and denounce ourselves on account of our laziness and lukewarmness in our concern for the world that is still lost. Let us also pray God for forgiveness of this our sin of omission toward the poor fellow-redeemed heathen, that our conscience, stained with the blood of their souls, may through faith be washed clean in the blood of Christ. Then the Word will be fulfilled also in us: “He that believeth on Him is not condemned” (John 3:18).¹²

Walther argues that no one can say as long as unbelieving people exist that the mission task of the church is finished or that an individual has no opportunity to be involved in mission. Every baptized Christian has been baptized into Christ, into his body, the Church. As such, he shares in the work of Christ to seek and save the lost. If he does not have opportunity himself to share the Good News of Jesus with someone who does not know him, he has the obligation to provide for those who do.

Walther also regarded as less than satisfactory the argument that the needs of the existing church were so great that nothing could be done about the needs of those who have no faith in Christ.

Let us not say, as many do: Why do we want to be concerned about the heathen when we have so much to do, right among the Christians? For Christ says that the true shepherd-heart leaves the ninety and nine righteous and goes out to seek the one that is lost.¹³

For Walther and the many pastors like him and the church that has grown from their work, the first purpose of the church is the carrying out of its missionary task. The work of the church is essentially mission work. The work that it does in the nurture of the faith is done to prepare people for their missionary task.

What is the first step in mission?

¹² Walther, “True Mission Society,” pp. 23f.

¹³ Walther, “True Mission Society,” p. 25.

When Jesus saw the harassed and helpless crowds that were like sheep without a shepherd and had compassion on them, his first reaction was not to form a cadre of missionary disciples nor to start a missionary school and sending agency nor even to rush in among them himself. Rather, he said to his disciples, whom he himself had called to be fishers of men, “The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field” (Matthew 9:37-38).

Because the harvest belongs to God, he is the one who will supply the workers and the plan. He is the one who opens the eyes of blind Christians so that they can see they are living in the midst of an unbelieving world. He is the one who changes their hearts and minds so that they can see the necessity to do something about it, and he is the one who leads his people into his service. The way in which this frequently works in the lives of Christians is summarized by Walther in these terms,

From this day on, let us fervently pray the daily mission prayer which Christ Himself has put upon our lips, namely, the Second Petition of the Lord’s Prayer, “Thy kingdom come.” And as we do so, let us think of the great stretches of land where Satan still sits upon the throne and where God as yet does not have a single subject of His kingdom of grace.

And let us also think of the . . . missionaries. . . . Let us pray God in their behalf that He will guard and keep them, give them wisdom, courage, strength and steadfastness so that they may carry out the difficult office assigned to them.¹⁴

Our prayers to God that he will preserve and expand his kingdom lead to consideration of the church’s priorities and commitment to providing people who share the Good News of Jesus.

How is God’s mission done?

After its treatment of the Good News of Jesus in “Article IV: Justification,” *The Apology of the Augsburg Confession* turns immediately to the question of how this faith is communicated. The editors of **The Book of Concord** note that the article, “Article V: Concerning the Office of Preaching,” although numbered separately is grammatically a continuation of the preceding article. The article reads,

To obtain such faith God instituted the office of preaching, giving the gospel and the sacraments. Through these, as through means, he gives the Holy Spirit who produces faith, where and when he wills, in those who hear the gospel. It teaches that we have a gracious God, not through our merit but through Christ’s merit, when we so believe.¹⁵

The truth of the Good News of Jesus must be proclaimed by human beings. God has created a special office to get this work done, namely the office of preaching or the

¹⁴ Walther, “True Mission Society,” pp. 24f.

¹⁵ “The Augsburg Confession” in **The Book of Concord : The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church** (Robert Kolb and Timothy Wengert, eds.). Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000, p. 40.

pastoral office as it is commonly referred to nowadays. The Holy Spirit uses the preaching of these men and their administration of the sacraments to create saving faith. These men play a critical role in the life of the church for the Lord has called them to the task of using the Scriptures in the life of the church in the full way they were intended: “for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work (2 Timothy 3:16-17). The man who is able to do this, to clearly and consistently teach the faith by word and deed, apply law and gospel to his own life and the lives of the people of the congregation in a clear and winsome way, is an enormous blessing to the life of the church.

Augsburg Confession Article V takes on a special significance in a mission context. On the one hand, it makes clear that any action that deprives people of the pastoral office deprives them of an opportunity to hear the Gospel and take part in the Sacraments and deprives them of the means that the Spirit uses to bring them to faith in Jesus.

If the church puts in place linguistic or socio-cultural requirements that would make it impossible for a group of new immigrants, for example, to be served by preachers of the gospel or to receive the sacraments in an understandable form, it is not being faithful to the teaching of its own confessions. Far more than educational issues are at stake since the issue ultimately involves opportunities for people’s lives to be touched by the Good News of Jesus.

In a time of massive immigration and accompanying social change, it is a challenge to the church to provide ministry in all of the forms in which it is needed. We do not fulfill our calling as disciples of Jesus if we insist that people must become like us (English-speaking, formally-educated, members of the middle class) before they hear the Good News of Jesus.

This was, in fact, one of the strengths of the work of the church in Walther’s day. Very few of the immigrants from Germany were motivated by religious issues as were Walther and the Saxon immigrants. Most of them came as economic refugees seeking a better life. Many of them came from Germany with little or no faith. They were met in this country by dedicated Lutheran people who knew the Good News of Jesus and were prepared to bear witness to them.¹⁶ How to do this in the 21st century is the challenge that faces the LCMS today.

On the other hand, the size and nature of the missionary challenge that faces the LCMS today emphasizes that the work of those who hold the preaching office is not complete when they preach. Rather, preaching is one of the tools that God has given to preachers to accomplish the task of equipping the laity, the people of the congregation, the followers of Jesus, to carry out their task of sharing the Good News of Jesus.¹⁷

¹⁶ See Walther’s description of the situation in “Glorious Challenge – Difficult Task,” in Walther, **Word of His Grace**, p. 109f.

¹⁷ Because the Lutheran confessors had to deal with controversies about the most basic of Christian doctrines, how is a sinful person justified by a holy God, they do not go into detail regarding what would have been a relatively minor issue for them: the role of lay people in sharing the Good News of Jesus.

Does this mean, then, that the missionary work of the church is done only by the handful of professional workers that hold the preaching office? Is it a part of God's plan that the mission work of those who do not hold the preaching office is confined to inviting unbelieving members to church where they can be preached to or inviting them to meet the pastor (who will be able to answer all of their questions)?

C. F. W. Walther was absolutely opposed to this conception of the life of the church.

You see from this, my friends, that the office of minister and adviser of souls was not instituted so that no one would have to teach any more and assume the responsibility for souls; no, the entire congregation should be a holy nation, a royal priesthood; every Christian is to be concerned about the soul's misery of his neighbor and help along that the saving Gospel win constantly more victories over men, that Satan's kingdom in the world be destroyed, and Christ's kingdom promoted. Oh, how much different the outlook would be, how much greater and more wonderful the blessing of God's Word would be, if every Christian would recognize his holy calling and discharge his office of royal priesthood!¹⁸

Walther's own theology was shaped by the Lutheran Confessions with their conception of the life of the church as a lighted city on a hill. In their view, when the Word of God is taught in its truth and purity and the sacraments administered according to Christ's institution, hearts and minds are changed, and the truth of the gospel is communicated through the lives of the believers. This is so attractive to people who have no faith in Jesus that they willingly come from east and west, north and south to be a part of God's kingdom.

Luther's explanation in the Large Catechism of the Second Petition of the Lord's Prayer, "thy kingdom come," supplies a striking example of this kind of thinking about the life of the church.

We ask here at the outset that all this may be realized in us and that his name may be praised through God's holy Word and Christian living. This we ask, both in order that we who have accepted it may remain faithful and grow daily in it and also in order

Nevertheless, Melancthon makes a comment in the *Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope* that raises the issue of pastoral responsibility in the preparation of laypeople. In a context where he discusses the right of the church to call pastors when the Roman Catholic bishops do not provide men who are able to share a correct understanding of the Good News of Jesus, Melancthon further observes that where the "true church" is, the building up of the laity will certainly be taking place. "This right is a gift bestowed exclusively on the church, and no human authority can take it away from the church, as Paul testifies to the Ephesians [4:8, 11, 12] when he says: 'When he ascended on high . . . he gave gifts to his people.' Among those gifts belonging to the church he lists pastors and teachers and adds that such are given for serving and building up the body of Christ." The service for which Melancthon expected that the laity would be prepared is not discussed. "Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope" in **Book of Concord**, 2000, p. 341.

¹⁸ C. F. W. Walther, "12th Sunday after Trinity - 1," in C. F. W. Walther, **Year of Grace**. Translated by Donald E. Heck. La Valle, WI: Donald E. Heck, 1964, pp. 272.

that it may find approval and gain followers among other people and advance with power throughout the world. In this way many, led by the Holy Spirit, may come into the kingdom of grace and become partakers of redemption, so that we may all remain together eternally in this kingdom that has now begun.

“The coming of God’s kingdom to us” takes place in two ways: first, it comes here, in time, through the Word and faith, and second, in eternity, it comes through the final revelation. Now, we ask for both of these things: that it may come to those who are not yet in it and that, by daily growth here and in eternal life hereafter, it may come to us who have attained it. All this is nothing more than to say: “Dear Father, we ask you first to give us your Word, so that the gospel may be properly preached throughout the world and then that it may also be received in faith and may work and dwell in us, so that your kingdom may pervade among us through the Word and the power of the Holy Spirit and the devil’s kingdom may be destroyed so that he may have no right or power over us until finally his kingdom is utterly eradicated and sin, death, and hell wiped out, that we may live forever in perfect righteousness and blessedness.”¹⁹

The growth in faith in the community of believers is intimately connected with the growth of the kingdom of God throughout the world.

In 19th century America, Walther found himself in a different situation, and so his emphases, not his theological approach, were somewhat different. Because Lutheran pastors had been about the business of “equipping the saints” (Ephesians 4:12), on the one hand, he was not dealing with a laity that was abysmally ignorant as Luther had found.²⁰ Rather, his people resources included laypeople who knew the catechism, who had been instructed by the pure preaching and teaching of the Good News of Jesus, who regularly took part in the sacraments, and were prepared to share the Good News of Jesus with unbelieving friends and neighbors. On the other hand, Walther found himself in a situation of enormous need. Huge numbers of German immigrants were entering the US, men and women who needed someone to share with them the Good News of Jesus. Therefore, Walther spoke explicitly about the need for lay involvement in mission in ways that had been implicit in the Lutheran Confessions. In an Epiphany sermon Walther says,

Although the accomplishment of salvation is a work which God alone has brought about without intermediary, in appropriation of salvation, nevertheless, the opposite takes place. In order that people may become partakers of salvation He has always used men who have already been brought to salvation. God Himself was the first preacher who brought to fallen man the message that a Redeemer and Savior would come into the world. But after this first proclamation God gave to men forever the charge, first to announce to mankind the One who should come, and then the One who came, and thus to make them partakers of everlasting

¹⁹ “The Large Catechism” in **The Book of Concord**, 2000, p. 447.

²⁰ See Luther’s description of the situation in his Preface to “The Small Catechism” in **The Book of Concord**, 2000, pp. 347-51.

salvation. . . . God himself did not go about the world inviting people to his salvation. This duty the patriarchs and prophets performed. . . . Wherever the Lord led his believers, there they had to stand up as witnesses of that which God had done for them, and reveal to the world the counsel of God for man's salvation.²¹

Walther goes on to discuss clergy and lay involvement in mission work in the context of the Great Commission (Matthew 28).

But finally, after fulfilling three years in the office of the ministry, Christ returned to His glory. He has withdrawn his visible presence from the world and has left His church the commission: "Go ye therefore into all the world and preach the Gospel to every creature, teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost" (Matthew 28:19). Now this command applies especially to those who have the special call to preach the Gospel and to administer the holy sacraments, but the other Christians are not excluded from this command. Clearly St. Peter addresses all Christians in general: "Ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people, that ye should show forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvelous light" (1 Peter 2:9). Furthermore, St. James writes to all Christian brethren that whoever converts someone, "Let him know, that he which converteth the sinner from the error of his way shall save a soul from death, and shall hide a multitude of sins" (5:20).

From this we see that every believing Christian should really be a missionary, that is that everyone has the duty to do everything within his calling and station in life to bring also to others the treasure of the saving knowledge which he has already found. . . . On him who has obtained salvation, on him is also the salvation of his brothers, yes, the salvation of the whole world laid—laid on his heart and conscience. Whoever is awakened from spiritual death to spiritual life should also awaken others out of death to life.²²

In another context, citing the example of Aedesius and Frumentius, two young Christians who were captured by pirates in the Red Sea and taken as slaves to Ethiopia and who eventually brought about the conversion to Christianity of the kingdom of Ethiopia, Walther could conceive of a situation where a layman might perform the functions of pastoral ministry and later be called into pastoral ministry.

Nevertheless, there are occasions, that is, there are times when the exercise of the office is necessary and yet no called servant is available; this is the first instance when every Christian can step forward as a spiritual priest and do that work in

²¹ C. F. W. Walther, "Arise, Let the Light Shine" in **The Word of His Grace, Occasional and Festival Sermons**. Translated and edited by the Evangelical Lutheran Synod Translation Committee, Lake Mills, IA: Graphic Publishing Company, Inc., 1978, pp. 216f.

²² Walther, "Arise," p. 217.

Christ's name. If in an emergency a woman baptizes, if a layman absolves someone in an emergency,²³ the baptism and absolution is proper, divine, and valid, as though it were done by St. Peter, yes, by Christ himself. Yes, if a Christian comes to a place where there are no Christians, he again can confidently come forward and preach the Gospel of Christ; if his hearers accept God's Word, then a true Church arises through such a preacher which has all the spiritual blessings of the Church; and he who is chosen in such a Church is a true servant of Jesus Christ, a bishop ordained by the Holy Ghost and a follower of the apostle. . . .²⁴

Walther describes these as "exceptional instances" of secondary importance to the opportunity for witness that every parent, every sibling, every friend has for sharing the Good News of Jesus. It was not enough for him that Christian laypeople pray for missions or give money to support missions. He urged that the laity be actively involved in doing mission. Ultimately it always gets down to a matter of compassion for the lost.

My friends, if we would meet someone lying helpless, wounded and smitten, in physical misery, we consider it our duty to give him a hand and not wait first for the regular doctor; we bind his wounds and take him to a place where he can be taken care of; we consider ourselves called to do that by the call of Christian love. Therefore, if a Christian finds a person wounded in his soul, and he can help him in some way, he is not to think: How does that concern me? The spiritual physician, the minister, can come and help him. No, my dear Christian, here you have the call of love which has also been extended to you; yes, even if the priest and Levite pass by that wretched person on the other side, you as a merciful Samaritan should continue to show yourself just as zealous.²⁵

Why involve laypeople in mission?

Walther recognized that lay Christians make an important contribution to the missionary task both because of their gifts and the opportunities they have to share the Good News of Jesus. He was well aware that spiritual gifts are not only given to pastors and other professional church workers, but

laymen who are not in the office of the ministry often have the most wonderful gifts, a wonderful knowledge of Christian doctrine, a superior gift of understanding and explaining the Scriptures, a wonderful gift of examining teachers and opposing the erring, the wonderful gift of guiding, comforting, admonishing, praying, and the like. Does not God clearly show that every Christian should be a co-worker in his vineyard? Yes, not only to Peter but to all

²³ Walther may be thinking of an example like that Melancthon uses in the "Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope." Melancthon tells of a story used by St. Augustine, "of two Christians in a boat, one of whom baptized the other (a catechumen) and then the latter, having been baptized, absolved the former." "The Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope" in **The Book of Concord**, 2000, p. 341.

²⁴ Walther, "12th Sunday After Trinity," pp. 272ff.

²⁵ Walther, "12th Sunday after Trinity," p. 271.

Christians he says, “When thou art converted, strengthen thy brethren” (KJV Luke 22:32).

To the extent that the *Ablaze!* movement motivates and expresses the determination of laypeople to be imaginatively and creatively involved in sharing the Good News of Jesus, *Ablaze!* will make a contribution to the evangelization of the world. Should laypeople choose to be spectators rather than participants, *Ablaze!* goals cannot be reached.

Why count?

The *Ablaze!* initiative set a goal of sharing the Good News of Jesus with 100 million people by 2017, the 500th anniversary of the Lutheran Reformation. It is not at all unusual for Lutheran congregations to set financial goals, especially when they are involved in major capital campaigns to construct churches or schools. It is perhaps less common to set work goals, to set goals for increasing worship attendance or Sunday school attendance, and the like, although this is perhaps more common in the modern world than in previous times.

The fact of the matter is that God has created human beings as people who count. Numerical information is easily understandable and conclusions are regularly drawn on the basis of numerical data about what should and should not be done. What Christians have learned, however, is that we do not live in a mechanistic world where numbers determine everything, but our faith in God opens us to the future in ways that are not accessible to the unbelieving world. Christians remember the example set by the disciples at the feeding of the crowd in John 6:1-14. The disciples could see only the five barley loaves and the two fish. They were not yet able to believe that with the blessing of Jesus these small gifts would feed the crowd with 12 baskets of crumbs to spare.

On the other side, numbers help us to get needs and resources into alignment so that our use of resources brings glory to God. The story of Gideon (Judges 6-7) shows this process in action. When Gideon looked at the situation, he saw that “the Midianites, the Amalekites and all the other eastern peoples had settled in the valley, thick as locusts. Their camels could no more be counted than the sand on the seashore” (Judges 7:12). He thought that an armed force of about 32,000 might be able to accomplish the task of defeating Israel’s enemies. God guided him to the understanding that 300 men would be sufficient to do the job, and that just as important as the victory was the clear testimony that God had done it.

The story of Gideon is a constant reminder that, indeed, human beings can make their plans and try to force situations to be productive through the use of the secular means of money and power. This is a special problem for American Christians who have been so influenced by the materialism that surrounds them that they too often believe that complex challenges can be solved by providing “things.” All too many congregations have learned to their sorrow that the ability to amass the resources to build a new building

does not automatically lead to rededication to the task of being the people of God involved in mission and evangelism.

As people involved in mission, the people of God frequently find themselves in the same kind of situation as St. Paul. “Paul and his companions traveled throughout the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been kept by the Holy Spirit from preaching the word in the province of Asia. When they came to the border of Mysia, they tried to enter Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus would not allow them to” (Acts 16:6-7). Paul and his companions thought that they understood the will of the Lord and had made plans, detailed plans, accordingly. They found, however, that this was not the time for the implementation of those plans, for God had a far greater mission in mind, “During the night Paul had a vision of a man of Macedonia standing and begging him, ‘Come over to Macedonia and help us.’ After Paul had seen the vision, we got ready at once to leave for Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them” (Acts 16:9-10). And so began the spread of the Good News of Jesus in Europe.

Ultimately, our willingness to count is often related to our willingness to be accountable. Lutherans have always been concerned that the Good News of Jesus be shared with the whole world. They have sung to Jesus with Luther,

It was God’s love that sent you forth
As man’s salvation,
Inviting to yourself the earth,
Ev’ry nation,
By your wholesome healing Word
Resounding round our planet.²⁶

However, when numbers are attached to “the earth” and “ev’ry nation,” then uneasiness sets in. What if we do not reach 100 million or one million or even a hundred thousand? As soon as a number is attached, the recognition that we are responsible for the people of the world becomes more specific. The people for whom we are responsible for sharing the Good News of Jesus begin to have faces.

There is no doubt that numbers have their own kind of hortatory function. C. F. W. Walther provides an example of numbers used in this way.

But how many are there still for whom the Gospel’s light has not risen at all! As we consider middle and east Asia, mid-Africa, Australia, and the countless islands of the Pacific, we see that still the largest and in part the most beautiful areas of the globe are enveloped in the night of heathenism. Even our new beautiful fatherland counts more than 100,000 heathen inhabitants. Yes, Eastern Europe which has been blessed for more than a century with Christianity, and West Asia and Northern Africa, which were at one time so richly blessed with the Gospel, are still filled with millions of worshipers of that false god whom Mohammed

²⁶ Martin Luther, “In Peace and Joy I Now Depart,” in **Lutheran Worship**. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1982, Hymn 185.

preached. Of approximately a billion people inhabiting the earth, about 600 million, two-thirds, are still without the light of the Gospel. . . .

Oh, let us then look at the terrible, powerful darkness, on the horrible gloom that still covers millions of our brothers. It is worse than if the earthly sun did not shine on them. Loud, and still louder, their mute suffering, their temporal and eternal misery rings in our ears: O Christians, arise, arise, shine; be concerned about us poor heathen. Hide not your light under a bushel. Place it on a high pedestal that it burn brightly, that it shine into our poor, comfortless, and hopeless, eternally lost heathen world.²⁷

Walther recognized that Christians need to understand the size of the task they face.

Counting and accountability have yet another function in the Christian church. Christians share the news of their successes (and failures) so that their fellow believers have the opportunity to share their joys and sorrows and join in prayers to God.

In his first missionary journey, St. Paul and his companions visited Salamis and Paphos in Cyprus, where a governor became a believer (Acts 13:12); Perga in Pamphylia; Pisidian Antioch, where “the word of the Lord spread through the whole region” (13:49); Iconium, where a great number of Jews and Gentiles believed (14:1); Lystra, where there were enough disciples to appoint elders as was also the case with the believing communities at Iconium and Antioch (14:21-23); Derbe, where Paul and Barnabas made many disciples (14:21); Perga again; Attalia and finally back to Antioch, “where they had been committed to the grace of God for the work they had now completed” (14:26).

Paul and his companions felt compelled to report the great things God had done to the people who had sent them off, who had fasted and prayed, who had blessed them on their journey. It was important that they call these people together, that they report the great things that God had done through them, calling the Gentiles to faith. Luke does not use specific numbers as a part of the report but he makes it clear that the missionary journey had made a difference. The Good News of Jesus had been shared; men and women had come to faith in Jesus and become a part of the kingdom of God.

A part of the Good News of the Biblical faith is that God does not give up on his people, weak and inadequate though they may be, but he sends them into the world in his service. This was the experience of the disciples after the crucifixion of Jesus. They were behind locked doors, not because they needed privacy to work on their strategic plans, but because of their fear of the Jews. Nevertheless, Jesus came and stood among them with a message first addressed to their troubled hearts and minds, “Peace be with you” (John 20:19)! This word of personal comfort for his followers was immediately followed by a command sending them out into the world. “Again Jesus said, ‘Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you’” (John 20:21).

²⁷ Walther, “Arise,” pp. 219f.

Yet, they were not ready to take up this task at once. In his last words to his followers in Acts 1, Jesus told his disciples again of the blessing they would receive and the task they needed to accomplish. “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8). Without the work of the Spirit, there would be no witness to Jesus. The question that the disciples had just asked, “Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?” (Acts 1:6), had made it abundantly clear that there would be no witness to Jesus beyond the people of Israel if the disciples acted on the basis of their own understanding of the task.

As a result, Jesus divided the task and made explicit what it meant to “make disciples of all nations” (Matthew 28:19). While the task would begin in Jerusalem and Judea, the neighborhoods of the disciples where they worked with people who shared the same language and cultural assumptions,²⁸ it would quickly move beyond that. Soon they would be required to get beyond their cultural stereotypes and prejudices²⁹ and prepare to answer questions that no Jew would ever ask³⁰ even though many of their cultural and religious assumptions were the same. Finally, they would cross remote boundaries of language and culture, dealing with people who were so different that the believing community would be astonished that such people could be included in God’s plan and would struggle to make their own adjustments to the new reality.³¹

It is significant that Jesus uses the conjunction “and” in his description of the missionary task of his followers. They are to be his witnesses in Jerusalem *and* Judea *and* Samaria *and* to the ends of the earth. As Jesus set out the task, it was not an option for his followers to say, “Our needs right here are so great that we cannot be involved in the missionary task.” His mission to the whole world—both near and far—was a part of the work of his followers.

Perhaps the greatest difference in perspective between biblical times and our present age is that the “ends of the earth” then could be thought of then in strictly geographical terms.³² In the modern world, the “ends of the earth” can frequently be found just down the block. Nevertheless, the task remains the same, the task of sharing the Good News of Jesus with those who do not yet know him, be they near or far from us.

Planning and preparation for the missionary task

If God leads and guides his people, does it make any sense to plan and prepare? Since Christians are engaged in spiritual work as they share the Good News of Jesus, should they not simply depend on the Spirit to provide them opportunities and the resources they need to respond to those opportunities?

²⁸ Note that Jesus explicitly excluded the Gentiles and the Samaritans when he sent his disciples out on their first training mission (Matthew 10, especially verses 5-6).

²⁹ Luke 10:30-37; John 4:9; 8:48

³⁰ John 4:20.

³¹ Acts 10:45; 11:1ff.; 15:12ff.

³² The list of peoples present in Jerusalem on the first Pentecost day (Acts 2:9-11) illustrates, however, the cultural diversity that was characteristic of the Roman Empire in the first Christian century.

Again, Jesus' interaction with that first Jerusalem congregation is instructive. Jesus told his followers that they would bear witness to him in Jerusalem and Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth, but they were to wait in Jerusalem until they had received the power of the Holy Spirit that would enable them to accomplish their task.

During this time, the Spirit prepared them for the next stage of the mission. They remained together in the room that served as their headquarters, and they prayed (Acts 1:13-14). They needed to be together, not only for their prayers, but, under the guidance of the Spirit, they were growing in their biblical understanding of their task. Peter, the disciple who seemed to grow most quickly in his understanding of the faith (Matthew 16:15-18), led the Bible studies. The doubt and fear that had characterized the Christian community after the arrest of Jesus was now addressed with a biblical understanding of why this had to happen (Acts 1:15-19).

This understanding of the Scriptures also led to conclusions about what the community needed to do as it faced its future. It was not an option to leave Judas's position unfilled, because the Old Testament required that someone take his place (Acts 1:20). Not just any pious believer would do, but the person who filled this office was required to be an eyewitness of Jesus' entire public ministry from his baptism by John through his ascension. In other words, guided by the Spirit through Peter, the community had reached very definite conclusions about the kind of leadership it needed. Even with such stringent requirements, however, two men were proposed for the position. Recognizing that as far as they could see both men were equally qualified, they entrusted their decision to the Lord, who knows the hearts of all, and trusted him to show his decision through the casting of lots (Acts 1:24-26). The community of believers had grown in its understanding of itself and its task by the time that first Pentecost arrived.

This is the kind of planning that the Christian church is always involved in as it shares the Good News of Jesus. It studies the Scriptures to make sense of its own situation and to grow in its understanding of what God would have his people do. It reaches conclusions about the task to be done and about the people required to do it. It turns to the Lord in prayer and accepts his guidance and direction. Planning does not make human activity any less God's activity but provides yet another arena where God works his good and gracious will.

Ultimately, the church lives to share the gifts it has received from God through Jesus Christ with the world. If the *Ablaze!* movement is successful, the result will not be necessarily that The Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod will be larger or richer or more powerful. Perhaps it will be able to say that it has become a little more effective in sharing the Good News of Jesus. This is exactly the point that C. F. W. Walther made when he preached at the opening of the first meeting of the Synodical Conference, the organization of Confessional Lutheran churches that worked together in the late 19th and for more than 60 years in the 20th century. It was no mean accomplishment to bring together so large and diverse a group of Lutherans united around a common purpose, but Walther urged the conference to keep its priorities straight.

. . . what would happen if we really would make the saving of souls the ultimate purpose, the end and aim of our joint work?

In the first place, we would not make it our aim to become an ever larger organization that, as people say, commands attention, and to erect an imposing, complex, though hollow, structure. Still less would we apply ungodly means to realize such an aim. . . .

And secondly, what would each individual synod of our association do? Each would not only rejoice over its own increase but rather over the increase in Christ's kingdom. . . .

Thirdly, what an influence it will be on our dear congregations and their pastors and on their relationship toward one another if all acknowledge the saving of souls as the end and aim of our joint work! They will all pull, as peacefully as they do zealously, on the same yoke. Even though all kinds of strife-causing questions might arise—yet the question: “Which course is best for the salvation of souls?” will quickly give the right solution. . . . then our dear congregations will say to one another, as Abraham said to Lot: “Let there be no strife, I pray thee, between me and thee, and between my herdsmen and thy herdsmen; for we are brethren..” (Gen. 13:8f.). Whatever will win the most souls for Christ, that would decide between us. . . .

To sum up: As long as our Synodical Conference makes the saving of souls the end and aim of its joint work, it will always be able to say with John the Baptist, “He must increase, but I must decrease” (St. John 3:30). And each one of our synods, each one of our congregations, and each one of our pastors will follow the basic precept of St. Paul: “though I am free of all men, yet have I made myself servant unto all, that I might gain the more. I am made all things to all men, that I might by all means save some” (I Cor. 9:19, 22). Thus, the poisonous worm of self-seeking will not gnaw at the tree of our covenant, and the Lord who has planted it will permit it to blossom joyfully, to grow and thrive and bring forth fruit unto eternal life for many.³³

With that, we have come full circle. Part of the reason why LCMS World Mission originally chose the number 100 million was that it wanted to make clear to itself and to others that this was a task so huge that it could never be accomplished by the wisdom and strength of LCMS World Mission or even the entire Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod. Only with the guidance and direction of God, only through the power of his Spirit could any good come out of this endeavor. C. F. W. Walther said it well,

Ah, if this great, important, holy matter rested on the fervor of our love, on the abundance of our means, on the training of our missionaries; in short, if it rested on our will and on our faith and strength, then we would have a sad situation. For

³³ Walther, “Our Common Task: The Saving of Souls,” in **Word of His Grace**, 1978, pp. 88f.

we are poor miserable sinners, whose love soon disappears; whose strength is only weakness; and whose knowledge is only patchwork. But we should not look at ourselves, but only at the fact that God has commanded this work of missions. He has promised to bless our humble work, and to bless it abundantly.³⁴

May God's good and gracious saving will be done also in and through The Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod's *Ablaze!* initiative!

³⁴ Walther, "Arise," in **Word of His Grace**, 1978, p. 222.