

## CTCR Review of “For the Sake of Christ’s Commission”

In a memo dated June 19, 2002, President Gerald Kieschnick requested the Commission on Theology and Church Relations to “review the document entitled ‘For the Sake of Christ’s Commission,’ a report of the Church Growth Study Committee, study the document thoroughly, and report its conclusions to me and to the church no later than the 2004 Synodical Convention.” This request was made, in part, to provide guidance and input to official entities in the Synod in evaluating “For the Sake of Christ’s Commission” as they carry out their official duties and responsibilities. The following review is submitted in response to this assignment from the President of the Synod.

### Introduction

“For the Sake of Christ’s Commission” (*FSCC*) was prepared in specific response to 1995 Res. 3-09 “To Address the Church Growth Movement.” The several “whereases” of this resolution affirm the teaching of Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions that it is only through the means of grace that God gives growth to his church. They also express concerns about “a denial of the efficacy of the Means of Grace” evident in “some Church Growth materials and practices.” It is then “Resolved:”

--That circuit and District pastoral conferences, District staffs, and congregations of the Synod be urged to study the CTCR report *Evangelism and Church Growth*...as well as other resources that critically examine the Church Growth Movement;

--That congregations, Districts and entities of the Synod which are using Church Growth materials and practices examine them carefully and use them with proper discernment;

--That *The Lutheran Witness, Reporter* and other publications of the Synod report on the errors in some Church Growth materials and practices and also in fairness show how some materials and practices may be used in service of the Gospel and the advancement of the Kingdom;

--That the President of the Synod consider appointing a committee to study and address how the truth of the Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions might be clearly proclaimed in light of the Church Growth Movement and the influences of American culture and pluralism;

--That the findings of this committee, if appointed, be shared with all of the Synod as soon as possible.

*FSCC* focuses its attention primarily on characteristics and tendencies of the church growth movement that are theologically problematic. In this respect it responds directly and specifically to the Synod's request to "report on the errors in some Church Growth materials and practices" and to set forth "the truth of the Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions" over against these errors. For reasons not explicitly stated in the report (e.g., perhaps a prioritizing of time and concerns, committee convictions about the nature and proper focus of its assignment, etc.), little attention is given in *FSCC* to the Synod's request to "in fairness show how some [Church Growth] materials and practices may be used in the service of the Gospel and the advancement of the Kingdom," toward the end that "congregations, Districts and entities of the Synod which are using Church Growth materials and practices" may "use them with proper discernment." It is the opinion of the CTCR that its report on *Evangelism and Church Growth* (referenced in 1995 Res. 3-09), together with its reports on *Spiritual Gifts* and *A Theological Statement of Mission*, can continue to be of service to the church in affirming many of the valid warnings of *FSCC* while at the same time offering some insight into how certain emphases of the church growth movement might be acknowledged and adapted in ways that are consistent with Lutheran theology.

As a way of highlighting some of the salutary statements and warnings of *FSCC*, and at the same time identifying issues and concerns that receive less attention in this

document, the Commission offers below observations and affirmations regarding the mission of the church built around the eight “theses” of *A Theological Statement of Mission (TSM)* and drawing on some of the insights offered in *Evangelism and Church Growth (ECG)* and *Spiritual Gifts (SG)*.

### **Mission Begins in the Heart of God**

God’s mission does not begin with us. The church’s mission does not begin with the church. Mission begins, continues and culminates in the heart and hands of a just and merciful God: “For GOD so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16). First, last and foremost, the church’s mission consists of “the Lord’s gracious initiative and ongoing activity to save a world incapable of saving itself” (*TSM*, 7).

As it carries out God’s mission, therefore, the church needs to guard against any understanding of or approach to God’s mission that centers in what “we” are striving to do and accomplish rather than in what God has done and is doing for, in, and through his church. *FSCC* is to be commended for its clear affirmation that “The mission of the church is God’s mission” and for its many straightforward reminders that “spiritual growth does not happen entirely or in part through man-made devices and methodologies” (2001 *CW*, 443). This is a central concern also in *ECG*:

As the Lutheran Church seeks to carry out the great commission in keeping with confessional doctrine, its approach will be noticeably theocentric. It is God who is working in the world through the means of grace for the salvation of the lost. *He* is the one who converts. While He has chosen to work conversion through human instruments, and while their role is very important, they are still secondary. (*ECG*, 38)

The fact that spiritual growth does not take place *through* man-made programs or methods does not mean, of course, that such programs or methods have no proper place

in a church that recognizes the theocentric nature of the church's mission. It is important to keep in mind that confessional Lutheran theology "neither disparages or diminishes the importance of the gifts of creation nor ignores their use within the church...God not only uses creaturely gifts for the extension of life in the world but he also brings them into the service of the Gospel" (*SG*, 56).

*ECG* shares *FSCC*'s concern that "Church Growth materials tend to become quite anthropocentric, focusing attention on the church's use of sociological techniques to communicate the Gospel effectively" (*ECG*, 39). Congregations that have become obsessed with "techniques," or discouraged because of a lack of growth in numbers, need to be reminded and assured "that God is the One who gives the increase" (*ECG*, 39). But the question raised in a pointed way by church growth proponents merits serious consideration also by confessional Lutherans: "Is the church today using every legitimate modern technique which God has made available in an effort to meet its mission challenge?" (*ECG*, 39). While confessional Lutherans will undoubtedly disagree with some church growth advocates about the degree to which certain "techniques" can be viewed as theologically "legitimate," they will certainly agree that every congregation needs to be challenged and encouraged "to be faithful in carrying out the task which [God] has given it," using all appropriate resources made available by God himself (*ECG*, 39).

### **God's Mission is Necessary Because of Sin**

The "Good News" of the Gospel has no meaning, necessity or urgency apart from the "Bad News" of the Law: "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). "None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands, no one seeks for

God” (Romans 3:10). “Since the fall of Adam all men who are born according to the course of nature...are full of evil lust and inclinations from their mothers’ wombs and are unable by nature to have true fear of God and true faith in God” (AC II, 1). Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions “tell it like it is.” They also testify soberly to the dreadful consequences of bondage to sin and Satan: spiritual, physical, and eternal death. The message of a Savior from sin makes no sense and can have no impact apart from the message that we are sinners, totally incapable of helping or saving ourselves.

As the church carries out God’s mission, therefore, it needs to guard against any and all temptations or tendencies to “soften” or “tone down” the Scriptural message of God’s law for fear of offending modern sensibilities or in hope of attracting people with a self-centered message of “affirmation” that avoids God’s uncompromising condemnation of sin. *FSCC* rightly confesses that “all have sinned and are equally in need of salvation,” and that “God has given the church a unique and different message, that the sinful world cannot appreciate” (443). It rightly warns against shaping the church’s mission *mainly* “by its attractiveness and friendliness to unbelievers, thus pandering to the old Adam” (443).

At the same time, the very seriousness and helplessness of humankind’s sinful condition should motivate the church—constrained by the love of Christ himself (2 Cor. 5:14)—to make use of all appropriate strategies and methods for communicating God’s saving Gospel with a lost and dying world. Even as they proclaim God’s law to those outside the church, Christian pastors and congregations also need to be apply God’s Law to themselves. They need to confess, humbly and honestly, their all-too-frequent lack of love and concern for the lost—which may manifest itself in such “commonplace” but

critical sins as a lack of “friendliness to unbelievers” and a lack of sensitivity to the real struggles and needs of those outside the church. It is certainly true that “the decisive criteria for the church’s mission” must never become “techniques of commercial marketing, rhetorical persuasion, statistical success, or external appearances of happiness or harmony” (*FSCC*, 443). But a church that truly grieves for the lost with the passion of Christ himself will certainly endeavor to use any and all appropriate techniques, statistical studies, methods of rhetorical persuasion, and means of promoting institutional health and harmony in order to bring as many lost sinners as possible into contact with God’s saving means of grace.

### **God’s Mission Centers in Jesus Christ**

Lutheran theology is a “theology of the cross.” It recognizes and confesses that, according to Scripture, the incarnation, humiliation, suffering and death of Jesus are—despite all outward appearances—“the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes” (Romans 1:16). By living a perfect life, Jesus fulfilled all the demands of God’s Law. By suffering and dying in our place on the cross, Jesus atoned for the sin of the whole world. By rising from the dead, he sealed his victory over sin, death and the devil. Jesus has done it all—*for us*, in our place. The message of *his* saving work is the deceptively simple yet miraculously powerful means with which, through which, and on the basis of which the church goes about its God-given work.

As the church carries out God’s mission, therefore, it needs to guard against any and all “theologies of glory,” which center in human reason or action or experience rather than in Jesus Christ and his work and his cross. *FSCC* quite properly emphasizes that “the ‘theology of the cross’ defines the mission and ministry of the church,” and offers

many strong reminders that neither faith in Christ nor membership in the body of Christ can be determined or “measured” on the basis of outward evidence alone. *ECG* also makes it clear that the church does not “glory in numbers” as an infallible sign of God’s blessing, nor does it glory in “dwindling numbers” as an infallible sign of faithfulness to God’s will (see, e.g., *ECG* 38-39, 41, 45). The church glories in the cross of Christ alone (Galatians 6:14), and “amidst the bewildering array of false ‘gospels’ being trumpeted in our world today, the church steadfastly confesses that there is salvation in no other name under heaven (Acts 4:12)” (*TSM*, 15).

At the same time, it is clear from Scripture that God desires his church to *grow* numerically—he desires more and more people to come to the saving knowledge of Jesus Christ by the power of his Spirit working through his means of grace (see, e.g., 1 Tim. 2:4; John 10:16, John 17:20-21). This is true despite the fact that God is surely “building his church” even when there is no external evidence of “growth” or “success.” While lack of numerical growth is not *necessarily* a sign of a lack of faithfulness to God’s mission mandate, it certainly *may* be such a sign. *FSCC*’s legitimate warnings against trying to “measure” the growth of God’s church on the basis of numbers might be strengthened if accompanied by more frequent and fervent warnings against the all-too-common sins (also present in the LCMS) of laxity and indifference to God’s mission. According to *ECG*, “If...the congregation is lax, indifferent, and content with being small, the pastor has the responsibility to apply the Law” (39). “The Law reminds us that a particular congregation may cease to exist because of error in doctrine, laxity and indifference, or even because of economic and social conditions” (*ECG*, 44). Just as God’s law is needed to expose our lack of commitment to and concern for God’s mission,

“the Gospel assures Christians that, resting on the sure promises of God, they can proclaim the Word with confidence, hope, and expectation, confident that the church will always remain (Is. 55:11; Matt. 16:18; 28:19-20)” (*ECG*, 44-45).

With regard to the question of “measuring” the health or growth of the church, it may be helpful to keep in mind that the word “church” is used in Scripture, in the Lutheran Confessions and in everyday conversation in a variety of ways to refer to various aspects of the church’s existence. The church is defined properly and theologically in the Lutheran Confessions as “the assembly of all believers among whom the Gospel is preached in its purity and the holy sacraments are administered according to the Gospel” (AC VII, 1). The health of the church (understood in this “strict” sense of the term) can be measured only in terms of its proper and faithful use of the means of grace (see *FSCC*, 445 and *ECG*, 38). But the church on earth necessarily takes the form of an empirical organization, with a staff, budget, property and registry of members. Specific empirical and organizational aspects of the church’s life or growth can (and must!) be measured in terms of concrete earthly realities such as “numbers” and “dollars.” This is part of the stewardship involved in caring for the people and resources that God has entrusted to the church as it carries out his mission. Even though these “spiritual” and “empirical” aspects of the church’s life can never be completely separated, keeping them distinct will help to guard against misplaced attempts to “measure” the spiritual health and growth of the church using earthly criteria, and against misplaced objections to measuring the organizational aspects of the church’s existence (see, e.g., *ECG* 31: “the church is a visible entity made up of countable people. There is nothing particularly spiritual in not counting them”).

**God's Mission is Empowered by the Holy Spirit**

“No one can say ‘Jesus is Lord’ except by the Holy Spirit” (1 Corinthians 12:3). God’s mission depends on the work of God in three persons: Father, Son *and* Holy Spirit. The Spirit creates and sustains the faith through which sinners claim and appropriate for themselves the benefits of Christ’s saving work. According to Scripture, the Holy Spirit works through ordinary means ordained by God—the water of baptism, the words of Scripture, the bread and wine of the Lord’s Supper—to deliver God’s marvelous, heavenly gifts of forgiveness, life and salvation. Faith in Christ, which receives these gifts, is not a human decision. Rather, through baptism, the Lord’s Supper, and the proclamation of the Gospel the Holy Spirit “calls, gathers, enlightens and sanctifies the whole Christian church on earth, and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one true faith” (SC II, 6).

As it carries out its mission, therefore, the church needs to guard against any and all confusion of the divinely-instituted and solely-efficacious means of grace with humanly-devised methods, programs, strategies or techniques for carrying out the mission of the church. It must keep in mind at all times that although God graciously chooses to use human instruments (together with humanly devised “plans” and “strategies”) to plant and water the seeds of his Word, it is always God—and God alone—who gives the increase (1 Corinthians 3:5-6). “So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth” (1 Corinthians 3:7). Once again, *FSCC* contains numerous salutary cautions and warnings in this regard.

At the same time—precisely *because* of the all-sufficient power of God’s means of grace—the church should be emboldened and encouraged to use all appropriate resources that God places at its disposal to extend and expand the use and distribution of the means of grace, so that as many people as possible can be exposed to these precious and powerful means through which God’s Spirit works to create and sustain faith in the Gospel. This means that the church should also rejoice in the many and various gifts of creation—including the gift and blessing of human reason itself—which can be brought into the service of the Gospel in “ministerial” ways.

While it is true, therefore, that “God’s earthly kingdom is subject to human reason, cultural dynamics and scientific laws” and that “God’s spiritual kingdom is subject only to His Word” (*FSCC*, 445), such a way of “framing” the issue might give some the impression that “human reason, cultural dynamics, and scientific laws” have no place in the church as “God’s spiritual kingdom.” While *FSCC* is certainly justified in warning against the false notion that “the church grows *through* the application of principles, prescriptions, programs and other human actions, *as opposed to* the work of the Holy Spirit in the Means of Grace” (446, emphasis added), it is also important to recognize that such reason-based “principles, prescriptions, programs and human actions” can often be used in ways that are not “opposed to” the work of the Holy Spirit through the means of grace, but rather serve the Gospel and the advancement of Christ’s kingdom (see, e.g., *ECG*, 40-41; *SG*, 55-70). *ECG* says:

If Lutherans use Church Growth materials, they must realize that the means of grace and mission methods serve different functions and purposes. Only the means of grace truly build the church. Organization is clearly not a means of grace and therefore does not itself build the church or cause it to grow. To be sure, there is a sense in which it can serve the Gospel. A study of the social, psychological, and cultural needs of the unconverted can assist a congregation in

better understanding how to approach them. Such a study can reveal, for example, their prejudices or biases toward the church and its message and the reasons behind these attitudes. As the congregation formulates goals and develops strategies it will need to take these factors into account. In summary, a well-organized mission program is compatible with the Lutheran doctrine of the means of grace, provided the pastor emphasizes that it is the Holy Spirit who builds the church through these means. (*ECG*, 41)

### **God's Mission is To and For Everyone**

“God so loved *the world* that he gave his only Son, that *whoever* believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life” (John 3:16). Our heavenly Father “desires all to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth” (1 Timothy 2:4). To those who have already come to the knowledge of the truth Jesus says: “Go therefore and make disciples of *all nations*,” baptizing and teaching in accordance with God’s Word and will (Matthew 28:18-20). Scripture is clear: God’s mission is to and for *everyone*.

As it carries out God’s mission, therefore, the church needs to guard against any understanding of or approach to God’s mission that would suggest that God, in bestowing the gift of his grace, is in any way “partial” toward those of a certain race or class or age or gender, since Scripture clearly teaches that “God shows no partiality” (Acts 10:34). The church itself must take care to avoid all temptations or tendencies toward favoring some or ignoring others in its efforts to reach out to people with the Gospel. *FSCC* properly reflects this concern when it repeatedly stresses the unity and universality of Christ’s church, and when it asserts that it is “spiritually harmful” when “the church is divided upon cultural or generational lines, violating the unity of diverse peoples in the Body of Christ.” “God’s Word,” says *FSCC*, “is not culturally-specific nor culture-bound. Christianity is for ‘every tribe and language and people and nation’ (Revelation 5:9)” (447).

At the same time, the church should be emboldened and encouraged by the universality of Christ's work and of the unlimited scope of his call to reach out to all people everywhere with the message of the Gospel, and to "strive to remove every human or sinful barrier that would keep others from hearing and taking seriously the Gospel of Jesus Christ (2 Corinthians 6:3)" (*TSM*, 21). It should not hesitate to use all appropriate tools and methods to identify and seek out individuals and groups who, like the Bereans (Acts 17:10-12), appear to be especially receptive to the truths of God's Word (cf. *ECG*, 38-39). *FSCC*'s discussion of cultural issues illustrates the challenges and sensitivities involved in maintaining the universality of the Gospel message while also taking into account the particularities of various cultures in need of the Gospel. On the one hand, for example, *FSCC* warns that it is "spiritually harmful" when "different messages are devised for different cultures," when "the church changes with each prevailing culture and every new generation," and when "the cultural range of the church" is adapted to "a single, momentary cultural expression" (447). On the other hand, *FSCC* acknowledges that God himself "calls His church lovingly to adapt her outreach to the culture of the hearers" (443), that "churches should be sensitive to their local cultures" and that "local customs should be respected and used as a means of outreach into the community" (447).

*ECG* also addresses this issue as part of its evaluation of the "homogeneous unit principle," which "holds that the Gospel is most effectively communicated within cultural units, among people who have the same cultural background, and who speak the same language." Some take issue with this principle, notes *ECG*, "on the grounds that it appears to be racist or separatistic along cultural lines and therefore contrary to what the Scriptures teach regarding the unity of the body of Christ. Others have found it to be

very useful in mission outreach, provided it is not carried out to extreme.” *ECG*

concludes that this principle

...can indeed be useful in mission outreach, if it is not raised to the level of an absolute. Uncritical acceptance and use of the homogeneous unit principle may cause the church to lose sight of the important fact that the Gospel is the power of God unto salvation, capable of reaching across cultural barriers to convert the lost. The book of Acts demonstrates how a Jew named Paul, under the direction and blessing of the Holy Spirit, could proclaim the Gospel of reconciliation successfully to a Gentile world made up of many different cultures, races, and peoples.” (*ECG*, 46)

### **God’s Mission is Our Mission**

God has entrusted his mission not to an assortment of individuals, but to the “one holy Christian and apostolic Church,” the body of Christ. “Faith in Christ is not merely a ‘personal’ matter, a private relationship between ‘me and Jesus.’ In our individualistic age and culture, God’s Word reminds us that each individual believer was born of the Spirit into a *family* of believers. We are all children of the same heavenly Father through faith in Jesus Christ (Ephesians 4:4-6)” (*TSM*, 23). Gathered around and strengthened by God’s Word and Sacraments, God’s people support and encourage each other through a common confession of faith, prayer and mutual service, growth in love and sound doctrine, exhortation and forgiveness, and the sharing of a wide variety of God-given gifts for the edification of all, so that the church as a whole may be equipped and energized for participation in God’s mission.

As it carries out God’s mission, therefore, the church needs to guard against focusing solely or one-sidedly on an individual’s “personal relationship with Christ,” while ignoring or downplaying the Scriptural reality of the believer’s incorporation into the body of Christ by the Spirit’s work through the means of grace. As the church reaches out to individuals with the Gospel, it must also recognize and emphasize the

corporate character of the church, both congregationally and extra-congregationally, and the crucial importance of ongoing catechesis of its new and existing members—both of which are strongly and properly emphasized in *FSCC*.

At the same time, this proper and Scriptural emphasis on the *unity* of Christ's church in its confession and worship must not be played off against the freedom granted to the church in both Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions for God-pleasing diversity in worship forms and other ecclesial rites and practices, so long as this diversity does not compromise or undermine God's Word. St. Paul's own testimony is instructive here: "I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some. I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings" (1 Cor. 9:22-23). *FSCC* warns against recent trends toward diversity in worship, but it is important to emphasize that a keen sense of balance is needed when addressing this difficult and sensitive issue. According to its own Constitution, "the Synod, under Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions, shall encourage congregations to strive for uniformity in church practice, but also to develop an appreciation of a variety of responsible practices and customs which are in harmony with our common profession of faith" (Article III, 7).

With reference to the Church Growth Movement, perhaps the deeper concern (also addressed forthrightly in *FSCC*) is the need to maintain the centrality and objectivity of the means of grace in the church's worship. *ECG* agrees:

The fact that many Church Growth advocates do not regard the sacraments as means of grace has its effect also on the worship services that are conducted. They recommend that a congregation use hymns and structure its services in a way that will conform to current cultural patterns. While Lutherans grant that God has not prescribed a specific order of worship, they recognize that the orders of worship that are used in the Lutheran church have been designed to accent the objectivity of the Gospel proclaimed in the Word and communicated in the sacraments, not the subjectivity of the hearers or their emotional response. The

‘divine service’ is primarily God’s service to us, not our service to Him. Consistent use of subjective hymns and emotional orders of service cannot help but undermine that accent. The pastor will be sensitive to the needs of unchurched visitors, but he will be just as concerned with the spiritual growth of those who are already members. This means neither slavish, ritualistic adherence at all costs to traditional orders of service, nor arbitrary substitution of ‘crowd-pleasers.’ Precise worship forms are adiaphora (neither commanded nor prohibited) indeed, but careless appeal to this principle may fall into the pitfall of acting as though worship forms can be entirely value-free. (*ECG*, 41-42)

Some forms of worship may better express our theology than other forms. In evaluating and developing worship forms, we need to remember that as Lutherans we are heirs of Luther and not Karlstadt.

Similar observations might be made about *FSCC*’s criticisms of changing and varied approaches toward catechesis and other forms of Christian instruction. While one can certainly resonate with *FSCC*’s concern that “this is not a time to turn Bible classes and the Sunday School into ‘sharing times,’ rather than training in God’s Word,” some may get the impression that acceptable catechesis means choosing between one of two “either-or” approaches. It seems reasonable and theologically defensible to hold that Christian instruction in today’s society can be enhanced by an appropriate balance between formal instruction and informal discussion, without having to make a “choice” between the two. As the formulators of *FSCC* would undoubtedly agree, great care must be taken to distinguish clearly between change and diversity in the church that is appropriate, God-pleasing and even necessary for the sake of Christ’s mission and changes in the church that are wrong and sinful because they contradict or undermine the unchanging truths of God’s Word and the divine realities conveyed through God’s means of grace.

### **God's Mission is My Mission**

The mission is God's, and it is the church's. It is also "your mission" and "my mission." Every believer is called to be involved in God's rescue mission in Christ.

Our personal involvement in God's mission takes place wherever we are—wherever God has placed us. Each of us, in our "station" or "calling" in life, is called to serve God and bear witness to his grace—whether as child, parent, husband, wife, citizen, employee, employer, government official, soldier, police officer, teacher, construction worker. (*TSM*, 27)

God calls some to be pastors, to serve him and his church in the divinely-instituted office of the holy ministry: to preach the Gospel, to administer the sacraments in the stead of Christ and in behalf of the church, to teach and admonish and counsel and comfort with God's Word. Others assist the pastor in carrying out this multi-faceted work, whether as professional church workers or as members of a local congregation. "Whatever you do," says Paul, "in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him" (Colossians 3:17).

As it carries out God's mission, therefore, the church must guard against any and all tendencies to despise or denigrate the calling or vocation of any Christian, no matter how simple or humble it may be or seem, or to pit "the pastoral office" against "the priesthood of all believers" rather than exalting both as precious and glorious callings of God, each vital in its own way in the accomplishment of God's mission. *FSCC* is to be commended for clearly confessing the necessity and distinctiveness of the pastoral office as a divine institution. Also commendable is its affirmation that "God's people are a glorious priesthood" and its encouragement to God's priests to serve in their "daily

vocation (i.e., the work of one's earthly calling, Christian witness in daily life, parental teaching in the home, etc.)" (444).

At the same time, especially in view of the historic Lutheran emphasis on Christian vocation and the gifts and responsibilities of God's "royal priests," one might have expected more discussion in *FSCC* about the many positive ways that the laity can contribute to God's mission *within* the life and ministry of the congregation itself and in support of the pastoral office. Few would disagree with *FSCC* that it is "spiritually harmful" to view the "primary purpose" of the pastor as "to train laity to do the real pastoral care" (444), but more might have been said about the proper training of laity for appropriate participation in leadership roles in worship, evangelism, teaching, mission, human care, and other vital congregation tasks in support of the office of the ministry. It surely is "spiritually harmful...when 'spiritual gifts' are substituted for the Means of Grace" (443), but congregational consideration and discussion of the proper place and use of spiritual gifts can also be appropriate and helpful. Depending on what is meant, one might resonate with *FSCC*'s concern that it is "spiritually harmful" when "small groups (meta groups) are viewed as foundational in mission" (443), even while being open to the possibility of appropriate and Scriptural use of "small groups" (or other organizational models or methods) within the congregation.

There is certainly nothing new—at least to Lutherans well-schooled in historic Lutheran theology—about the principle that "lay people play a vital role in the church's mission and ministry." Yet even the most obvious and familiar truths need to be repeated, re-emphasized, re-learned and re-applied from time to time, especially in changing contexts and circumstances. Thus, as *ECG* says:

The emphasis which Church Growth has placed on the role of lay persons has been a valuable contribution to the mission outreach of the church. Church Growth has reminded us that the laity also have a significant role to perform in the work of Christ's kingdom. It has stressed the importance of training the members of the church to be more able communicators of the Gospel and witnesses for Christ. (*ECG*, 42)

*ECG* goes on to say:

However, as Lutheran congregations use missiological principles which assume and focus on the role of the laity, they must be cautious lest they lose sight of the Biblical truth that the office of the ministry is a divine institution. This office should not be confused with "ministry" in a general sense, which belongs to all Christians. The pastor must, therefore, not become merely an organizer, a manager whose time is spent largely in coordinating the efforts of the congregation as the members witness for Christ...he will not lose sight of the fact that he has been called to carry out the distinctive functions of the pastoral office, that is, to preach the Word, to administer the Sacraments, to remit and retain sins. (*ECG*, 42-43)

### **God's Mission is Urgent**

In 2001 Res. 1-02, the Synod in convention—on behalf of the LCMS as a whole—confesses and laments that "an indifference to Christ's Word and work continues to hinder our ability to tell the Good News about Jesus," and it implores "God's forgiveness for our failure to give the Gospel the precedence that it deserves." This confession is particularly sobering in view of Scripture's repeated reminders that the end of all things is at hand: "He who is coming will come and will not delay" (Hebrews 10:37). "The love of Christ constrains us to intensify our mission efforts as we see the end drawing nearer, and as we see more and more people living and dying without true knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ" (*TSM*, 29).

As it carries out God's mission, therefore, the church must guard against all human and sinful distractions, disputes, divisions or diversions that Satan attempts to use to keep God's church from doing what God has called it to do. It must guard against

sinful pride in past and present “accomplishments” and against faithless despair over apparent failures and weaknesses, both of which militate against the character and calling of God’s militant church in the last days. Rather—as *FSCC* clearly and strongly emphasizes—the church should take comfort in the sure knowledge that the mission is the Lord’s: mission begins, continues and culminates in the heart and hands of God. “Although [God] has entrusted it to us, he continues to guide and direct it, sustains it with his presence and promises, and empowers it by providing the divine means through which the mission accomplishes its divine purposes” (*TSM*, 29-30).

At the same time, the church needs to take seriously, in these last days, the fact that God has indeed “entrusted His mission to us,” and it needs to examine constantly and truthfully its zeal for and faithfulness to his call to make disciples of all nations. *FSCC* acknowledges that “God has truly blessed The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod,” citing its “2.5 million members in more than 6,000 congregations” (448). *ECG* cites some more sobering statistics: A “serious decline in membership growth and an increase in ‘back-door losses’ over the past 15 years;” “25% of the congregations of the synod do not gain a single adult from the outside each year, and another 12% gain only one;” “only 58% percent of the infants we baptized are ever confirmed,” resulting in a “loss of 25,000 to 30,000 children annually” (*ECG*, 6).

While we certainly need to trust completely at all times that God is truly guiding and empowering the church’s mission efforts, we also need guard against allowing such “trust” to degenerate into a sinful resignation to the “inevitability” of numerical decline in today’s church, or into a sinful justification for our lack of zeal for, dedication to, and creative efforts on behalf of God’s mission. The stated “goal and objective of Church

Growth is the salvation of the lost...: ‘How can we most effectively reach the lost in the many cultures of this earth and integrate them into the work of the church?’” (*ECG*, 26). While confessional Lutherans may disagree—sometimes seriously—with some of methods and presuppositions proposed by some church growth proponents, they should be able to agree about the urgency and importance of this “goal and objective” of reaching the lost for Christ by means of God’s means of grace, to be willing to take full responsibility for their own failures and shortcomings in pursuing this God-pleasing goal, and to make use of as many helpful and valid insights and resources as possible—whatever their source—in theologically responsible ways for the sake of God’s urgent and all-important mission.

### Conclusion

While commending the goal and certain emphases of the Church Growth Movement, *FSCC* voices two serious and foundational concerns. It says, first of all:

Some emphases of the Church Growth Movement have highlighted the importance of mission work and a desire for healthy growth. There is certainly nothing wrong with common sense suggestions that might make a church more accessible and relational—the need for visibility, adequate parking space and facilities, ways of making a congregation more welcoming to new members, and the like. Such ideas are helpful. The problems with the Church Growth Movement have to do with the assumption that God’s Word is not sufficient, that it needs to be supplemented with “contemporary social and behavioral sciences.” (442).

It says, secondly:

The goal of many Church Growth proponents, to win souls for Christ through the Gospel, is a worthy one. Ironically, many of the Church growth techniques work instead to undermine the Gospel. Church Growth principles have roots in American revivalism, which suggests that people have within them the free will to “make a decision for Jesus.” This implies that gaining new Christians is a human work—a matter of rhetorical and emotional manipulation...rather than the work of God. (443)

As noted throughout this review, *FSCC* contains many helpful warnings and cautions related to this twofold concern, and for this it is to be commended. The Commission recommends that *FSCC* be read and studied. It also recommends that the CTCR report *Evangelism and Church Growth* be read and studied, noting that *FSCC* gives considerably less attention to the possibility of making proper use of certain emphases and insights of the Church Growth Movement in the service of God’s mission while at the same time rejecting any and all assumptions that would call into question the sufficiency of Scripture and the adequacy and efficacy of the means of grace.

*ECG* says:

Church Growth principles have been described as universal truths. That is, they are in a general way acceptable to all Christians. Examination of these missiological principles reveals that some of them are indeed Biblical principles which have been used in Christian churches, including The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, for many years. Others are new and have their origin in sociology, anthropology, and psychology, but they too have been found to be useful, also by numerous congregations in The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. Still other principles have caused some concern in Lutheran circles chiefly because they are perceived as coming into conflict with Scriptural teaching, especially with the doctrine of the means of grace. (*ECG*, 36)

*ECG* goes on to suggest that

...as we attempt to evaluate Church Growth principles, two important questions need to be kept in mind: Do these missiological principles reflect a theology which is non-Scriptural to the point that their application in Lutheran congregations is unacceptable? Or, can they be modified so that they are consistent with Lutheran theological presuppositions, providing new missiological techniques acceptable to Lutheran pastors and congregations as they carry out the great commission? (*ECG*, 36)

As they reflect on the cautions and warnings offered in *FSCC*, pastors and congregations may also find it helpful to review the “Guidelines for Evaluation” offered by the Commission in the conclusion of its report *ECG* (48-49), and to keep in mind its “concluding word:”

Dependent on the promises of God given through the means of grace for growth and on the power of the Holy Spirit who bestows on it His manifold gifts, the church accepts with thanksgiving all methodological insights and wisdom that will enhance and facilitate the proclamation of the Word. In Christian freedom, though with Biblically tested criteria, the church will gladly make use of methods and techniques designed to accomplish this end. (*ECG*, 50)

“The church belongs to God. He has purchased it with the blood of His Son. He preserves and protects it. He guarantees its future. Believing such promises, Christians may therefore mutually encourage one another to ‘serve the Lord with gladness’” (*ECG*, 50)—seeking always to carry out his mission in the power of his Spirit and in complete faithfulness to his Christ-centered Word and will.

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