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Reflections on a Church in Mission

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The Evangelical Lutheran Church In Canada (ELCIC) is a church in mission. These reflections are written in response to an invitation to outline the mission of this church through the Division for World Mission.

Missionaries? In this day and age? Thirty years ago questions such as these were raised in discussion groups at universities.

What are we doing in mission? The church has long struggled to understand its mission and church history reflects that struggle.

The ELCIC is clear in its definition of the mission of the church: "The mission of this church, as an expression of the universal church and as an instrument of the Holy Spirit, is to bring the Gospel of Jesus Christ to people in Canada and around the world through the proclamation of the word and the administration of the sacraments and through service in Christ's name."¹

The mission of the church is the mission of God. That mission is the saving work of the Triune God. The church is in mission. The ELCIC is a church in mission in Canada and abroad. That mission is to proclaim by word and by deed the good news of the Gospel that "God so loved the world...". The mandate is expressed by Christ himself: Go, make disciples of all nations. The task is for all followers of Christ: to live Christ by word, deed, and through fellowship; to live the love of God.

We are imperfect instruments. We live in the world, and we live our faith in the context to which we are called. The expression of faith in Christ will vary according to that context. We are servants of God and servants of humanity. The church participates in the mission of God through proclamation but also

through service in Christ's name. As members of the church, followers of Christ, we participate in the mission to bring the word of life and the cup of cold water to people in need. In a world whose needs are love, peace, justice, and a cup of cold water, we must participate in the mission to bring the message of reconciliation and the message of justice in Christ's name. We are servants.

Wherever people are viewed as if they don't count, we must protest—protest in order to affirm the worth of life in Christ. How can we tolerate the ongoing utter selfishness of oppression, militarism, and political domination which denies the dignity of peace, promotes mass starvation and brutally kills? We must proclaim the good news. We must proclaim the end of oppression. We must proclaim the dignity of life, the dignity of life in Christ. In Christ one is a new creation. In the face of oppression we must proclaim the rule of Christ, the rule of love, and of the recognition of the value of human life. The task is great. So is our Lord!

The ELCIC is a church in mission. Through its divisions and offices the church seeks to meet the challenges of that mission at home and abroad. The ELCIC presently supports 15 missionaries who serve in various capacities in six countries. These missionaries are involved in proclamation, in service, in development, and in advocacy.

Five pastors serve abroad. Pastor Jose Ariza and his wife Carol serve in a parish ministry which includes work with rural poor in Colombia. Pastor Margaret Kreller is inaugurating a new ministry in Lima, Peru, serving the urban poor. In Papua New Guinea Pastor Barry and Alice Lang function in parish ministry, especially with young people, teaching religious education in schools in the Madang area. Pastor Brian Rude, who recently arrived in El Salvador, is involved in a most sensitive parish ministry serving people caught in the throes of political turmoil. Pastor Hubert and Marcy Willrich serve a parish in Rivera in Uruguay which includes proclamation and service to the poor people in the area.

Other ministries include an agricultural development program in the Finisterre mountains of Papua New Guinea, conducted by Ernest and Kathi Haab. Dolores Hall, nursing instructor, helps to train young people in a recognized medical training school as rural community health workers. Bert and

Frances McNair, together with Miss Carmen Campbell, prepare teachers at Balob Teachers College in Lae, Papua New Guinea. Mrs. Joan Nabert directs a rehabilitation program for people recovering from leprosy. Whether as pastors or as people involved in other professions, the missionaries of our church live their faith by word and by deed in the places to which God has called them.

At the time of the formation of the new church, the Division for World Mission undertook the support of Canadian missionaries who were members of the merging churches. Various relationships with partner churches and institutions were also established at that time, some of these through formal working agreements.

At the second meeting of the board of the Division for World Mission, time was set aside for some "futuring" sessions to establish the direction of the new board. Among other matters, that included the affirmation of support of those missionaries who became part of the division as a result of the merger as well as a commitment to continued support of the churches and institutions with which these missionaries are related.

Questions facing the board included the possibility of concentrating DWM efforts in one continent or area rather than of outreach around the world. The board also reviewed the possibility of establishing new, pioneer work should need and opportunity make that evident. For a proposed plan of outreach, the counsel of church leaders was sought. And there were also continued requests from partner churches for more personnel.

At a recent meeting the DWM board consulted with Dr. Roland Miller, internationally recognized missiologist, on "Mission in the 90s". As a result of this discussion, a Task Force is currently preparing recommendations to the board to guide future efforts. Among concerns highlighted in the discussion with Dr. Miller, were such concerns as an agenda for the poor, the emergence of the Third World church, trends of localization, and the development of ecclesial (base) communities. Solidarity with women, trends toward urbanization, the search for leadership, the rise of world religions, and the population explosion, also form part of the concerns of the board in its discussion of mission in the 90s.

The church is in mission. It is true that the manner of being in mission changes as times change. Throughout the centuries, the church has not only been founded and organized in all parts of the world, it has also tried to interpret mission in order to realize its mandate. Where established churches exist, the ELCIC collaborates with them in mission. Gone are the days when all decisions are made by representatives of northern churches. Gone too are the days when "missionary" was a title to be avoided. There has been a struggle, and over the years the very nomenclature illustrates the nature of that struggle. We have gone from missionary to fraternal worker to consultant to missioner and, it seems now, back to missionary. In the transition from "mission fields" to partner churches we have heard of such things as devolution, self-support, self-government, self-reliance, fiscal self-reliance, moratorium, contextuality, wholistic mission, and now reverse mission.

All this represents the continuous effort to understand the mission of the church and how to be about that mission in the places in which we live. The Divisions for World Mission, Canadian Mission, Parish Life—indeed the total ELCIC—participate in that study. Studies in evangelism and mission have been circulated throughout the church. It is important that each congregation consider its role in mission. One of the finest documents that has appeared recently is a study of mission prepared by the Lutheran World Federation through its Department of Church Cooperation: *Together in God's Mission: An LWF Contribution to the Understanding of Mission.*²

The ELCIC is a church in mission. It is not alone in that mission, because participation in mission should not only be the sending of missionaries from north to south. For years now the DWM has proposed partnership through exchange of personnel on the level of pastors, seminary internships, staff and students of seminaries and colleges of the church. Study tours from Canada to partner churches are being organized to promote better international awareness and understanding. There is much to be done and resources are limited. The challenge is before us, at our doorstep and at doorsteps around the world.

Dr. Allan Boesak comments on Isaiah 40 and says:

The word of our God will stand forever.

Let us therefore not falter in our obedience to this God, let us remain faithful to him and to his promises. Let us work for, and let

us believe in humanity, that it shall become a sign of the kingdom of God. Let us work for, and believe in justice, that it shall become a sign of the kingdom of God. Let us believe in the power of God, that it shall become real, and that it shall overturn even our history and hasten that day when "every valley shall be exalted and every mountain and hill made low; the rough places shall be made plains. And the glory of the LORD shall be revealed and all flesh shall see it together" (vs. 4,5).³

The urgency of the common task is highlighted in the LWF study on mission:

The urgency of the common task leads the Lutheran World Federation once again to extend a plea to all its member churches to renew their commitment to the one mission of the church universal and to pool their gifts in announcing by word and deed the salvation for the world in Jesus Christ. He, the light of the world, is the gift of God to the church, to God's people in mission and to the whole humankind.⁴

Notes

- ¹ Evangelical Lutheran Church In Canada Constitution, Article IV, Section 1.
- ² LWF Documentation, No. 26 (Geneva, 1988).
- ³ Allan Boesak, *Walking on Thorns, The Call to Christian Obedience* (World Council of Churches, 1984) 57.
- ⁴ LWF Documentation, p. 29.