

God's Word—A Heritage to Share

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“God's Word is Our Great Heritage.”

We did not know the hymn before the early 1940's. Its Danish origin was probably responsible for the fact that it did not appear in our German Hymnal. Though it was translated into English already in 1909, we did not become acquainted with it until some 30 years later when it appeared as number 283 in *The Lutheran Hymnal*.

It did not take long for it to catch on. Its strong and inspiring melody for most of us was new and fresh. It had but a single stanza, which made it convenient to use in various parts of the worship service and at the same time contributed to the fact that many learned to know its words from memory. In the 1950's under the directorship of Professor Meilahn Zahn it became the theme song of the Michigan Lutheran Seminary choir. Today, as the mural in the foyer of the new building here at MLS reminds us, it not only continues to be the seminary hymn, but serves as a statement of purpose for the school as it helps prepare pastors and teachers for the church. It is fitting that its opening words should have been chosen as the theme for this convention which marks both the double anniversary of Michigan Lutheran Seminary and the 125th anniversary of the founding of the former Michigan Synod which one hundred years ago opened MLS as its seminary and worker training school.

It is perhaps fair to say that in the 1950's many of us thought of the hymn largely as an encouraging statement of our Synod's position in the theological controversy concerning the word of God, its nature and interpretation, which had invaded even the Synodical Conference. The word was a heritage to hold and guard and the hymn said this to us. It was a source of strength to be able to sing, “Lord, grant while worlds endure, we keep its teachings pure throughout all generations.”

All the while we were singing it, however, there were two lines which were saying that holding fast to this heritage and guarding it is not our total task. God has given his word not only to assure us of our own salvation, but with the intent that we should “spread its light from age to age.” It is fitting then that in studying our convention theme we should not only speak of guarding the heritage given to us, but also center attention on the fact that God has given us his word as

A Heritage to Share

1. A Heritage Meant to be Shared

The previous essay has described this heritage and how it came to us. It is the inspired, inerrant word of God by which the Holy Spirit has called us, enlightened us with his gifts, sanctified and kept us in the true faith. The very word “heritage” is a reminder that it is not of our own making, but that it has come to us through others who have possessed it before us.

Priceless are the blessings which are ours through the word. Among them are the gifts of the Spirit of which Luther speaks in the Third Article and which one of our catechisms lists in such simple form,

The knowledge that Jesus Christ is my Lord and Savior,
The assurance of faith that I am justified before God through Christ,
Peace with God,
The hope of heaven,
The witness that I am a child of God,

Comfort in all tribulation,
 Confidence to pray,
 And all blessedness which Jesus Christ, my Lord, has obtained for me.

If we value what we have received, how can we possibly withhold it from others? It is significant that as originally written the hymn which sets the tone for our convention did not stand alone. It was composed by Nicolai Grundvigt as the fifth stanza of his Danish version of Martin Luther's, "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God." It was his response to Luther's powerful statement of faith and poetic exposition of the 46th Psalm. Grundvigt looks back to that of which Luther sings so eloquently and comes to the inescapable conclusion that all of this has been given to us not just to possess, but to share. "To spread its light from age to age shall be our chief endeavor." This has to be the believer's response to the great and wonderful blessing God has given through his word.

It really can be no other way. God's word is a heritage which is meant to be shared, and nowhere is this clearer than in the bible itself. We might think first of all of the great commission and of some of the more familiar and frequently used mission texts. Yet we would be selling ourselves and our people short if we were not to look beyond and see that this is the message not just of a few isolated passages of scripture, but is the dominant thought which runs throughout the word.

Look where you will. The message is always the same. It begins in the garden with God's declaration that the victory to be won by the woman's seed over the serpent and his seed was meant without exception for the descendants of Eve. It was carried forward in the days of Seth as God's people began to call on and proclaim his name. Noah, as "a preacher of righteousness" (2 Peter 2:5) proclaimed God's saving purpose as well as God's impending judgment to a world which was desperately in need of hearing it. Repeatedly God revealed that purpose to Abraham, his son and grandson in the promise, "And all people on earth will be blessed through you."

Throughout Israel's history that promise was at the heart of God's dealing with his people. We see it reflected in Solomon's prayer at the dedication of the temple, "O Lord God of Israel..., hear from heaven, your dwelling place, and do whatever the foreigner (praying toward this temple) asks of you, so that all the peoples of the earth may know your name and fear you, as do your own people Israel" (1 Kings 8:43).

The Psalms are filled with references to the nations of the world and God's saving will concerning them. Of more than 175 such references we mention only a few.

Psalm two is messianic and speaks of the establishment of a kingdom in which all the nations of the earth will enjoy the privileges of membership. It records the word of the Lord to his Anointed One,

You are my Son;
 today I have become your Father.
 Ask of me,
 and I will make the nations your inheritance,
 the ends of the earth your possession.

Psalm 22 with its striking portrayal of the suffering Savior points to those who are to receive the righteousness which he won for a sinful world when it declares,

All the ends of the earth
 will remember and turn to the Lord,
 And all the families of the nations
 will bow down before him...
 They will proclaim his righteousness
 to a people yet unborn—
 for he has done it.

The second to the last verse of Psalm 46, “I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth,” speaks of the Lord’s will for the nations of the earth and could well have served as inspiration for Grundvigt’s addition to Luther’s hymn.

What is written in the Psalms is the message of the prophets as well and finds its finest expression in the book of Isaiah. Where is there a richer assurance of God’s grace, mercy and forgiveness? Who can measure the strength we have received from his word of pardon,

Though your sins are like scarlet,
they shall be as white as snow,
though they are red like crimson,
they shall be as wool,

and from the assurance that God’s forgiveness is ours through him who was “pierced for our transgressions and...crushed for our iniquities,” and because of the fact that “the punishment that brought our peace was upon him and by his wounds we are healed.” How often haven’t we found just what we needed in the day of deep trouble, distress or bereavement in his word of comfort,

Do not fear, for I am with you
do not be dismayed, for I am your God.
I will strengthen you and help you;
I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.

But is all of this meant only for a select few? Read Isaiah from beginning to end and you will have the answer in one grand declaration after another that all mankind is to see his glory (chapter 40:5) and that his sons are to be brought from afar and his daughters from the ends of the earth (chapter 43:6). From the introductory chapters with their reference to “the last days” when “the Lord’s temple will be established...and all nations will stream to it,” to the closing chapter and the Lord’s promise that he will “gather all nations and tongues, and they will see my glory,” this rich book of prophecy brings us one striking and powerful statement after another that God intends the blessings of salvation for all people.

What is so prominent in the Old Testament is the dominant theme of the New. From the angel’s announcement to the shepherds, “I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people,” to John’s eyewitness account in Revelation that the great multitude standing before the throne of the Lamb is “from every nation, tribe, people and language,” the message is the same. The good news is intended not just for a few but for all.

Especially compelling are many of the very passages which are such a rich source of comfort concerning our own salvation. We readily identify ourselves with the lost when Jesus speaks of those he came to seek and save and know that he is speaking about us and to us. But his words are not only about us, but about all others as well. When we hear Jesus tell Nicodemus about the love of God, we know that he loves us. But his love is not for us alone. It is for the whole world, and that includes the billions living on every side of us.

The same thought is set before us in one New Testament word after another. It is in the Baptist’s announcement, “Look, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!” We hear it in Paul’s statement, “There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.” It comes to us in John’s declaration, “Jesus Christ the Righteous One. He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours, but also for the sins of the whole world.” All have one common theme. The forgiveness and salvation we have in Christ is meant for everyone.

It is against this background that we have the words of the Great Commission. Jesus’ directive to make disciples of all nations is not an isolated set of instructions offering an optional activity to his believers. Rather, it is a direct and personal application of the theme which runs throughout scripture. Jesus died for all. It remains

now for those who by faith possess this truth to carry it to those for whom God has intended it, to all people no matter where they may be.

Precious is the heritage which God has given us in his word. "Through life it guides our way. In death it is our stay." But that is not the end of it. It is ours not just to possess and hold, not just to treasure and guard. It is a heritage which is meant to be shared.

2. A Sharing Most Urgently Needed

The need for such sharing goes beyond our comprehension. It was great already on the day Jesus said, "You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." It is estimated that at the time of Christ the world population stood at about 250 million, less than the number of people we have in the United States and Canada today. Since that time this number has been multiplied by nearly 20 times to somewhere in the neighborhood of 4.8 billion. If present estimates are correct, by the year 2000, and that is just 15 years away, the figure will rise to about 6.35 billion, one and one half billion more than we count today.

Just how many of these are Christian in the sense of belonging to the communion of saints is known to God alone. We are limited to using statistics which take into account only that which can be seen and measured. While these vary according to the competence and diligence of the person gathering them, there is general agreement on the overall numbers. Perhaps the most comprehensive and widely accepted tabulation is the one by the Rev. Dr. David B. Barrett in his monumental *World Christian Encyclopedia*. His count is as of 1980 when the world population was thought to be 4.374 billion. He lists 1.433 billion as adherents of a Christian religion, leaving just short of three billion people who either are non-religions and atheist or embrace some non-Christian religion or belief.

What the 1.433 billion figure means is open to considerable interpretation. Ralph D. Winter, general director of the Center for World Missions, Pasadena, California, working with a slightly different overall set of figures counts 219 million active Christians, whom he describes as people who "definitely possess a genuine personal faith and are capable of winning others to that faith." A billion others he looks on as being inactive Christians who themselves are the focus of most of the evangelism and mission effort of the church.

The three billion non-Christians Winter divides into two groups. The first, 500 million in number, are those who are culturally near and could be reached by some existing Christian congregation or denomination. The remaining 2.5 billion, well over half of the world's people, are sufficiently removed linguistically, socially, economically, or culturally so that they are not realistic candidates for membership in existing Christian churches. They can be reached only if these churches are ready to send missionaries to cross the cultural, language and other barriers which are there. These people number 83% of the non-Christian population of the world. Yet North American churches have only 9% of their missionaries working among them. This means that as matters stand today something like one half of the world's billions could well be born, live and die without once having heard the sweet sound of the gospel. So extensive is the need to share what God has given us in such rich measure.

The real urgency of that need is not, however, to be found in a list of statistics, but in the word of God. A portion of scripture which comes to mind as we sing of spreading its light from age to age is the 60th chapter of Isaiah with its call to the Lord's believers to "arise" and "shine."

It is a bleak picture which this chapter paints of those who are without hope in Christ. "See, darkness covers the earth, and thick darkness is over the peoples." Darkness here as elsewhere in the scripture is a symbol of sin, death, unbelief and hell. It is a way of describing the spiritual condition of those whose hearts have not been illumined by the light of the gospel. It is another way of saying that "all have sinned and come short of the glory of God," that because of sin every man, woman and child is under the curse of the law and without Christ is lost and without hope forever.

How important that we keep this in mind as we think of the three billion. All too easily the desperate plight of those who are without Christ can escape us. It is not unusual for people to feel that mission work,

especially overseas, is not really all that necessary. Some go so far as to say that people elsewhere are happy enough in their religious beliefs and that we neither need nor ought to attempt to replace these beliefs with faith and hope in Christ.

But is it true? Oswald Riess in the instructor's guide for his widely used adult instruction manual relates the account of a missionary from India who some years ago addressed an audience in Chicago. At the close of the lecture a young man asked, "Why do you go to India to bother the people there about Jesus Christ? Aren't they getting along alright without him?" The missionary answered in a way that ought to come to our minds if ever we are tempted to think that it is not so bad for others to be without Christ. "No," he said, "they are not getting along alright without him. No one, anywhere, is getting along alright without him."

No one anywhere is getting along alright without him. There is no other way. Jesus said, "No one comes to the Father except through me." It is either, "Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved," or, "Whoever does not believe will be condemned." Either one has hope in Christ or he is in thick darkness, without hope, without the glorious light of the gospel. So desperate is the plight of those who are without Christ.

It is against this background of darkness that Isaiah urges us and all believers, "Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord arises upon you." See what God in his grace has done for us. Appreciate what it means to live in the light of the glory of the Lord. Look at the billions still living in darkness. It can only lead us to see how urgent is the need for us to share the heritage God has given us.

3. Sharing Within the Framework of Fellowship

Where do we begin? Right where are, of course. Sharing our heritage is first and foremost a very personal matter. Jesus reminds us that the mouth speaks of that which fills the heart (Luke 6:45). It is to be taken for granted that we will begin with those who are closest to us. We will want our children, our family members, our friends and neighbors to have what God in such rich measure has given to us.

It is when we come to the edge of that little circle that things become more difficult. How do we effectively touch those living on the other side of town? Other cities in our county and state are that much farther beyond our reach. Reaching out to the world with the word seems to be an utter impossibility.

The barriers begin to fall, however, as we find ourselves in fellowship with other believers. The Holy Spirit not only calls us to faith but also has his way of bringing us into active fellowship with those who share that faith. We think first of all of our membership in a local congregation. There together with others we are able to reach out in a way which is hardly possible for us as individuals. Through our Sunday schools and Christian day schools, our evangelism committees and canvassing teams, through the activities of our pastors, vicars and teachers we are able to reach out to others in our community.

But again there are limits. How about that area in another state where there is an unusually high proportion of those who do not confess Christ? How about the 2.5 billion elsewhere in the world who today are without any effective gospel witness? How shall we bring the word to them?

Some congregations find it possible on their own to sponsor outreach programs in areas other than their own. Some of the early growth of our Synod took place when established congregations helped found daughter congregations in towns nearby. Occasionally one hears of large congregations outside our circles which single-handedly carry out world mission programs of their own and send and support missionaries overseas. For most of those represented here today, however, such a course is hardly possible or practical.

Yet there is a way. That is for congregations to join forces in a larger fellowship in which together with others they are able to do what would not be possible for them alone. Such a fellowship is our own Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod. Formed 135 years ago by three pastors serving as many congregations in Milwaukee and its immediate vicinity, it has grown to a body of 1,159 congregations as of the beginning of this year, served by over a thousand pastors and some 1,600 Christian day school teachers.

There are many benefits which accrue to a congregation through membership in a synod. There is first of all the strength which comes through having others at one's side who hold the same faith and confession. But there are other benefits as well. We need but look through the *Book of Reports and Memorials* for this

convention to see how much of the Synods activity is in the form of direct service to our congregations. An extensive worker training program provides pastors for our pulpits and teachers for our classrooms. A board for parish education gives valuable assistance to congregations in their education programs for young and old. A Synod board keeps touch with our young people as they leave home to go to college and into the military service. We look for help in our evangelism and stewardship efforts. The Synod through people especially called for this purpose is able to give such help. In our midst we have the visually handicapped, the hearing impaired and others with special needs. Again, there is a Synod board which is able to give the specialized help which is needed. Our members move to other parts of the country. In many instances the General Board for Home Missions is there ahead of them and has a congregation ready for them to join. We could mention more, but it would only serve to underscore the statement made by Professor John Brug in an article prepared for the *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*, "Though we often call our synodical offerings 'mission offerings,' a large percentage of these offerings support work which is really for our own benefit."

Our Synod's work, however, does not stop here nor is it the ultimate purpose for which it exists. That purpose as defined by the 1969 Synod convention "is to serve all people to God's world with the gospel of Jesus Christ on the basis of the Holy Scriptures." Listed first among the Synod's objectives is "to share the Gospel of Jesus Christ with all people." The first three policies under this objective are

1. To promote personal Christian witnessing to the gospel by each member of the Synod,
2. To press for continuing growth and development of world missions,
3. To promote and expand home mission activity.

While, as we have already pointed out, the responsibility for carrying out this objective and the policies flowing from it rests first of all on the individual believer and then on the congregation to which he belongs, it is through the Synod that our worldwide mission outreach is most readily implemented. We elect synodical boards for the specific purpose of carrying out a mission program at home and abroad. No less than 93 persons serve on these boards on Synod and district levels. Both home and world missions have an executive secretary and other full-time staff. Together they administer an outreach program which as we shall outline in a moment has touched all 50 of our United States, two provinces of Canada and 17 other countries on five continents.

The other divisions of the Synod also are essential components of our worldwide mission outreach. Right out in front in this respect is the Division for Worker Training: When we send out missionaries, it is to "serve all people in God's world with the Gospel of Jesus Christ on the basis of the Holy Scriptures." At the risk of overstatement we are going to say that in our mission outposts both at home and abroad it is, if anything, even more critical than in our established congregations to have workers who know the holy scriptures, are doctrinally sound, and are able to present the truth of God's word clearly and uncompromisingly. It is reassuring to be able to come to the seminary through the synodical Assignment Committee and know that a man recommended by the faculty will meet these high qualifications. It is with equal confidence in their commitment to the truth of God's word that we are able to call recommended teacher candidates to serve in our missions, whether it be in the central city, Apacheland, Hong Kong, or Japan. This in today's general theological climate is a distinct blessing.

Other divisions and departments of our Synod's administration likewise have their essential places in our worldwide mission outreach. From the president's office to the copy room, from the fiscal department and benevolence division to the stewardship office and Board of Trustees, all must ultimately serve to carry out the Synod's primary objective. They together with other boards, committees, and individuals too numerous to mention here are elected, appointed, or employed to assist the 400,000 members of our Synod and the congregations to which they belong in reaching out to the world with the word. We can hardly imagine trying to do it without them.

Currently we are looking at the way in which all of this is organized. For the past two years the Administration Survey Commission has made a thorough study of the way in which the Synod conducts its

business and carries out its work. Its carefully prepared report and recommendations are among the principal items before this convention.

As our delegates evaluate these recommendations, there is one question which must remain basic. What will best serve to get the gospel out to those who have not yet heard it? The commission gives the underlying purpose of its report in the prayer that its recommendations “might be used by the Lord of the Church in even a small way to help the Synod become more effective in the ministry of extending and conserving the gospel.” A streamlined and carefully crafted organizational structure is not an end in itself. It is important only to the extent that it enables us to direct the largest possible proportion of our strength, effort and funds into the actual preaching and teaching of the word. The bottom line is and ever needs to be the extent to which that word is brought to those still living in thick darkness.

That is what sharing our heritage within the framework of fellowship is all about.

4. The Extent of Our Sharing to Date

Obviously, a Synod which has grown from three congregations to some eleven hundred has done some sharing of the word. Though a substantial portion of the increase in the first half of our history came through the addition of the Michigan, Minnesota and Nebraska Synods to the original Wisconsin Synod, yet there long has been an active outreach into areas not already served by the Synod and its congregations.

In the early years the bulk of this effort was directed toward gathering people who already were Lutheran and were coming to the New World with the great waves of immigration from Europe. Any other kind of outreach was almost entirely incidental.

Even in more recent years our home mission program has to a large extent been geared to providing for people who had some previous contact with the church. When new work was begun, it generally was in places which had a nucleus of WELS members who had moved away from their home congregations.

There have been some very positive aspects to this kind of outreach. In the past 25 years it has been a large factor in our Synod's moving into 34 new states and in our presence today in each of the 50 United States and three provinces of Canada. Many of the missions begun in this way have become self-supporting congregations, thus contributing to the growth of the Synod and at the same time releasing funds which could be used to begin new work elsewhere. The home mission report to this convention shows that there are 216 mission congregations in various stages of development, while exploratory work is being done in 33 other areas.

A significant development in the past several years has been a distinct shift of emphasis in the direction of reaching the unchurched. The report of the Home Mission Division states, “From great concern for conservation of ‘our own’ and outreach to ‘our own kind of people,’ with lesser concern for raw ‘unchurched potential’ areas, the focus has changed to greater concern for the unchurched wherever they may be found.” A well developed inner city mission program and new work among Hispanics in our larger cities are part of this change in focus. Procedures are being reviewed and programs are being revised to bring them into line with this shift of emphasis. The calling in this past biennium of an executive secretary for evangelism and expanded courses on evangelism at the seminary give reason to hope that a similar shift is taking place in congregations throughout the Synod.

Expansion into mission work which involves crossing national and cultural boundaries did not, however, come as quickly. It is true that already at an early date there were some who saw this kind of mission effort as an urgent and important part of the Lord's mandate to his church. Pastor F. Schmid was the first Lutheran pastor in Michigan and founded a number of congregations which still are members of WELS. In the middle 1840's he and two other pastors founded a synod, calling it the *Missionssynode*, which had as one of its specific purposes that of bringing the gospel to Indians then living in Michigan. Unfortunately, doctrinal laxity resulted in the dissolution of this first Michigan Synod and in the discontinuation of this early cross-cultural mission effort.

The Wisconsin Synod as such was already into its second generation before there was formal recognition of the need for this kind of outreach. This came in President Bading's 1883 presidential report in

which he included the suggestion that a commission be appointed to “look into the existing mission societies doing work among the Indians and to find one to which the Synod could lend its support.”

No such society could be found, and it was another nine years before the Synod selected Pastors Theodore Hartwig and O. H. Koch to go to the great Southwest with instructions to find an Indian tribe onto whose territory no missionary of any denomination had as yet set foot. Their favorable report and recommendation that this be the Apache tribe moved the Synod to act quickly, and on October 9, 1893, John Plocher and George Adascheck, fresh out of the seminary, were on their way to Apache land to begin our first cross-cultural mission.

From that small beginning our world mission outreach has expanded until today it touches five continents. It is not our purpose here to detail the history of this development except to point out that it did not come easily. There was much hesitation along the way, even a good deal of questioning as to whether we ought to be reaching out beyond our borders when there still was so much to do at home. As a result the next 59 years saw our world mission expansion limited to the founding of a mission in Poland in 1924 and to acquiring a 16 percent interest in the Synodical Conference mission to Nigeria in 1936.

It remained for the 1951 convention in New Ulm to point the way for a world mission expansion which today involves us in 17 countries beside our own. As we look back, the move looks small enough, two missionaries for a new field in Central Africa and one to care for our servicemen and women and to investigate mission opportunities in Japan. But it was the impetus we needed to move us into fuller participation in a worldwide mission outreach.

This world mission outreach today involves us in three distinctly different kinds of activity.

1. Mission fields in which we work directly through WELS missionaries. We have missionaries resident among the Apaches and also in Antigua, Puerto Rico, Colombia, Malawi, Zambia, Hong Kong, Indonesia, and Taiwan. It is not possible for reasons beyond our control to have WELS missionaries live in Mexico, Cameroon and India. The three missionaries for Mexico live in El Paso, Texas, and in addition to doing Hispanic work in El Paso make regular trips into Mexico to guide and supervise the work there. Our missionaries in Hong Kong are charged with making periodic visits to India. A special guidance and worker training program in Cameroon involves counselors and instructors both from our mission in Central Africa and from the United States.

Serving these fields are 51 missionary pastors, a lay missionary language coordinator and 24 mission teachers. Working alongside them are 20 national pastors and 63 national evangelists. Some 60 other nationals are in various stages of being trained for the ministry either as evangelists or as pastors. Membership figures for the end of 1984 show that our world missions number 10,640 communicants and over 20,000 souls.

2. Standing at the side of young overseas confessional churches and giving them a measure of support and guidance through our Synod's Board for World Missions. They are the Lutheran Confessional Church in Sweden, Norway and Finland, Christ the King Lutheran Synod in Nigeria, and the Orthodox Lutheran Church of Brazil.

These churches number some 840 communicants and 1,340 baptized members. They are served by 14 pastors and eight evangelists or pastoral assistants.

3. The Central Asia Radio Ministry. Initiated as a Luther anniversary project by the 1983 Synod convention, this German language broadcast is beaming the gospel of Christ to nearly two million German-Russians living in Siberia, Kazakstan, and other Central Asian provinces of the Soviet Union.

There are basically three different ways in which we have come to the places where we are working today.

1. Taking the initiative and looking for places in which to do mission work.

Generally this involves preliminary study, field surveys, and an evaluation of these surveys. As a matter of policy, this is the route through which the Board for World Missions prefers to begin work in a new field. It is in this way that we entered Apacheland, Zambia, Puerto Rico and Colombia. In a sense it is also the way in which the Synod chose to begin its Central Asia Radio Ministry.

2. Responding to appeals. Generally these come from individuals or groups which already are involved in church work and often arise out of confessional concerns. Evaluating such appeals requires a great deal of careful and patient investigation. It is in response to direct appeals that we began work in Hong Kong, Indonesia, Mexico, India, and Cameroon. It is also in answer to similar appeals that we are giving assistance and guidance to the churches in Scandinavia and Brazil.

3. Spreading out from existing missions. Work in Malawi grew out of that which was being done in Zambia. Some of our early members in the Lusaka area had their roots in Malawi. A mailing program which was begun in Zambia in the late 1950's soon reached into neighboring Malawi. An on-the-spot survey in 1962 revealed that Malawi was a field ripe for harvest. It has subsequently become our largest single world mission field.

Taiwan was an outgrowth of the work in Hong Kong. Voice of Salvation broadcasts reached the island. A Chinese pastor and a vicar were sent from Hong Kong to follow up on those who were listening to the broadcast. Prospects for extensive work in Taiwan were bright enough to convince our 1977 Synod convention to authorize the calling and sending of three WELS missionaries to expand the work there.

Three other areas do not fit the foregoing patterns exactly. Our first contact with Japan was through the Missionary who was called to "do exploratory work in the interest of our servicemen and women stationed in the Japan-Korea area and also to investigate opportunities' for the opening of mission stations for our Board of Missions" (1952 Report of the chairman of the Lutheran Spiritual Welfare Commission). He and the congregation he was serving later left our fellowship, and the Japan mission received a new start with the calling of a seminary graduate in 1957 and of a veteran missionary the following year.

Our contact with Christ the King Lutheran Synod of Nigeria might seem to fit under "Responding to Appeals." Its members did indeed appeal to us some 16 years ago. It should be mentioned, however, that for the most part these are people and congregations who were served by our missionaries at the time when the Synodical Conference was still intact and was carrying on an extensive mission program in Nigeria. They are our spiritual children and they came to us because they could not harmonize the current trends in the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Nigeria with that which they were taught a generation ago.

Antigua originally was a mission of the Federation for Authentic Lutheranism. It became a WELS mission in 1975 when FAL resolved to merge with our Synod. It is administered by the General Board for Home Missions through its South Atlantic District Mission Board.

It is hardly possible in the brief time available to us today to present more than this bird's-eye view of our world mission fields. Nor is it really necessary to do so. This ought to be enough to indicate that the Lord has been good to us, not only in leading sometimes reluctant witnesses to reach out to the world with the word, but to blessing what he has led us to do.

Blessing there has been. In the past year the number of baptized members in our world mission fields increased by 8%, communicants, by 9.8%. The Lutheran Church of Central Africa alone is larger in number of souls than six of the 12 districts of our Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod. Adult baptisms, a rough measure as to how we are reaching those totally outside the household of faith numbered 715 in our world missions compared with 664 for the entire Synod in the United States and Canada. True, these statistics vary

from one part of the world to another. They attempt to measure something which can not really be measured, the working of God's Holy Spirit to those he calls to faith through the power of the word. Yet they are a tangible reminder that God blesses what he asks us to do, and we thank him for it.

Such has been the extent to date of the sharing of our heritage with others.

5. Sharing the Word, Our Chief Endeavor

What does all of this tell us about our commitment to the task the Lord has set before us?

It would seem to tell us quite a bit. We have already spoken of the spread of our home missions into every state and into two provinces of Canada. Fifteen of the 17 countries on our present world mission map have been added since 1951. It is fair to say that in the second half of this century there has been considerable growth in our interest in and commitment to sharing our heritage.

There are other encouraging indicators as well. We have seen the increased use of mission fairs to stimulate mission interest in our congregations. Well planned Epiphany mission seminars at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary are bringing missions into sharp focus for students and professors alike. Mission emphasis at Dr. Martin Luther College is being reflected in the interest a good many of our Christian day schools and Lutheran high schools are taking in our worldwide mission program. These same years have seen the founding and remarkable growth of the Lutheran Women's Missionary Society, a group dedicated entirely to promoting interest in the work of missions. Individuals have been making large gifts to underwrite mission programs which would otherwise have remained unfunded. The remarkable response to the Reaching Out offering is without question closely tied to the desire of our people to reach out to the world with the word. For all of this we are thankful to him who moves the hearts of his people to share the blessings of salvation with others.

But is this as far as we are going to go? Can we be satisfied with having reached and remaining on a sort of plateau in our worldwide mission effort; high though it may be in comparison with past efforts? Is it enough now to maintain a status quo which ties future mission growth to the growth of the Synod itself? Or ought we to be doing more?

The opportunity and the call to do more are before us. Some of this is very close to home. Barrett counts 161 million Christians in the United States. That leaves more than 60 million who are entirely outside the Christian church. The figures for Canada are likely quite proportionate. There is plenty of room for the 400,000 members of our Synod to reach out right where they are.

The opportunities beyond our borders stagger the imagination. The population of countries other than the United States and Canada in which we are doing gospel work numbers in excess of 1.25 billion. In those countries we have 46 WELS missionaries working alongside approximately 100 national pastors and evangelists. At best it is little more than a drop in the bucket. The population of countries not in any way being touched by a personal WELS mission outreach is in excess of 2.8 billion. We can rationalize that in no way can we reach all these people. Yet the facts and figures are there and they will not go away. We dare not ignore them.

A specific call for us to do more is before this convention. The General Board for Home Missions has as its goal 22 new mission/manpower openings in each of the next two years. The Board for World Missions is urging that new work be undertaken in Brazil with an initial team of five missionaries, a country in which Barrett tells us 60 million still dabble in the worship of spirits. The board is also requesting a substantial increase in the number of missionaries for fields to which we have already committed ourselves and is asking us to turn our eyes to the vast areas where today there is no gospel work of any kind being done.

The inevitable question will be asked as it has previously been asked in similar circumstances. Can we do it? We have heavy commitments in our local congregations, in our area programs and in other phases of synodical work. Can we afford to allocate a larger proportion of our resources to the work of missions?

A more appropriate question may well be whether we can afford not to do it. Professor Brug in the article quoted previously calls attention to the fact that less than 4% of the offerings brought by our members

for the Lord's work is being used for home missions and less than three cents out of every dollar to carry the gospel beyond our borders to the places where 16 out of 17 of the people in the world are living.

Can we really say that we are operating at the outer edge of our ability to reach out to others? A look at a number of other church bodies indicates that it may not necessarily be so. We could mention some not significantly different in size of membership from that of our own Synod which have 250 or more missionaries where we have 46. The September, 1984, issue of *Mission Frontiers* carries a list of churches and mission societies which have plans in place which in the next ten years would increase their number of overseas missionaries by 200 and 300 percent and more. It is difficult to imagine that their financial base is significantly different from that of our own membership. It would seem that we have come nowhere near the limit of the ability God has given us to underwrite this important work.

Do we need encouragement and incentive to do more? We will find it not in a comparison with that which others are doing, but rather in a grateful assessment of the heritage the Lord has given us and preserved among us. If you want to appreciate this anew, take out your copy of *This We Believe*. Read the articles which speak of the holy scriptures, of sin, universal redemption, objective justification, justification by faith, the work of the Holy Spirit and the Means of Grace. Compare them closely with the word of God and appreciate anew what by his grace we possess. It is a heritage which is almost unique on today's religious scene. In a humbling yet strengthening assessment Professor Ernst H. Wendland writes:

By the grace of God we have continued 'to uphold and to contend for the faith that was once entrusted to the saints.' Modern liberalism has not infiltrated our ranks with Its homocentric humanism so that we have lost our credibility as a church of Jesus Christ and with it our mission in the world. (*Missiological Perspectives*, page 72).

This is not our doing. It is Gods. Let us thank him for it.

What a powerful incentive to reach out to others! We do have so much to share. We further quote Professor Wendland.

A rich legacy, however, is not something to be buried. It needs to be invested. If our rich doctrinal heritage is worth preserving, it is also worth sharing. If we are convinced that our doctrinal stakes are firmly established, then we should demonstrate this by lengthening the cords of the gospel of salvation wherever we can. If we are so sure that we have the truth of God in all its purity and that few others have it as we do, then we should want to demonstrate this with all zeal. (*Missiological Perspectives*, page 109)

It is here that we must begin if spreading the light of God's word is to be our chief endeavor. We do various things to stimulate mission interest. We publish mission articles in *The Northwestern Lutheran*. We distribute tracts and brochures describing our Synod's mission program at home and abroad. We listen to our missionaries on furlough and our hearts are touched by the words they speak. All of these are legitimate means of bringing the mission story to our members, and we ought to look for ways of using them more often and more effectively. Yet the real incentive for reaching out begins and ends with an appreciation for the blessings of salvation which are ours in Christ.

How urgent then that we focus our efforts on faithful use of the word in our worship services and Bible classes, in our Christian day school, high school, college and seminary classes and in the devotional life of our families. Let us learn to marvel anew at the wonder of our salvation somewhat in the spirit of the fifth grader who in a classroom discussion of the second coming of Christ heard the teacher say that it was entirely possible that Jesus could return that very day and then responded with an involuntary, "O boy!" At the same time let us remember that our study of the word is not complete short of seeing that what God has done for us he has done for all. Where the heart is filled with the joy of salvation, the mouth will have to speak. Where the word is fully taught and proclaimed, sharing the word must inevitably follow.

Things will then fall into place, and they will be very much in line with the priorities set by the hymn writer. Our work close to home *is* important. That is where the Lord has placed us and where he expects us to be busy. Our congregational and area programs, our institutional missions, the Christian training of our youth, our care for the aged and handicapped are a vital, part of that which the Lord has given us to do. Together with others in our Synod we need to train pastors and teachers and provide other necessary services for our congregations. Yet urgent and productive as these activities are, they are not and dare not become an end in themselves, but must find their ultimate and urgent purpose and goal in reaching out to others, no matter where they may be, and especially in bringing the gospel to the billions who have never heard of the Savior who has redeemed them.

To this end we will keep our programs and priorities under review to assure that they remain in line with our principal objective “to share the gospel of Jesus Christ with all people.” We will ask ourselves some probing questions. Is this at all times our chief endeavor? Are we willing to do without some of the niceties in other areas of our work in order to make more resources available for reaching out with the word? Are we determined right from our synodical administration to the missionary in the field to make every bit of personal effort and every dollar as productive as possible in bringing the word to those who have not yet heard it? Are we pressing our mission boards and particularly the Board for World Missions to identify areas and groups of people among whom no Christian mission work is being done to make every effort to serve them also with the gospel of Christ?

A bit closer to home we will look at our sermons and our bible classes and examine whether they lift our eyes beyond our own little circle to the fields which are so ripe for harvest. We will review the agendas at our congregational meetings to see whether they call for adequate consideration of the mission task the Lord has set before us. We will scrutinize our congregational budgets to determine what impact our programs at home have on our worldwide outreach. As individuals we will examine our personal priorities together with our cash outlays to see how these square with the priority we profess when we sing Nicolai Grundvigt’s hymn.

Most important of all, we will thank God for continuing to set before us an open door and ask for renewed energy and zeal to work while it is day and the opportunities to reach into other parts of the world still are there. A grateful assessment of the heritage the Lord has given us will leave us no other course.

Is it worth it? Jesus says it is. On the day he reached across cultural barriers at Sychar and touched the hearts and lives of a Samaritan woman and her neighbors he told his disciples, “Look at the fields. They are ripe for harvest. Even now the reaper draws his wages, even now he harvests the crop for eternal life, so that the sower and the reaper may be glad together” (John 4:36).

There is real joy in sharing our heritage to the far corners of the earth. It is a joy given to our mission workers when they see people coming out of the darkness of paganism and unbelief to the glorious light of the gospel and to the precious hope we have in Christ. It is a joy which is given to each of us as we hear and read our missionaries’ accounts of the wonderful working of the word to the hearts and lives of people in places as far removed from one another as Lilongwe in Malawi is from Tsuchiura in Japan and as far as Poughkeepsie in New York is from Jakarta in Indonesia.

The best, however, is yet to come. The finest joy of all is waiting for us on that great day when in the presence of our Savior we will meet face to face all who have been brought to him through the power of the gospel which we were instrumental in bringing to them and when together with them we will sing,

Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain,
to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength
and honor and glory and praise.
To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb
be praise and honor and glory and power
for ever and ever!

Powerful and compelling incentive to make sharing the word our chief endeavor!

Then let us continue to ask for grace to share the heritage God has given to us. It is his work. He will surely give his blessing!