

The Need For Contemporary Published Materials For Parish Instruction In The Wisconsin Synod

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The following remarks are offered to the delegates of the Second Biennial Convention of the South Atlantic District by the chairman of your District Board for Parish Education as a personal essay on the future needs facing both our District and our Synod in the area of contemporary published material. The purpose of this essay is to stimulate discussion and to see whether the views of the author strike a responsive chord among those charged by this Convention with shepherding the work of the Lord in America's Southeast in the years to come. Should a consensus of concern and purpose be found, it is the further object of this essay to propose some constructive ideas which might be laid before the responsible officers and boards of our Synod and eventually before the Synod Convention in 1977.

Historical Perspective

While the Lord of the Church and His Word remain unchanging, the visible church is ever changing to meet new challenges. The members of the WELS in its 125th year are certainly aware of this as they look backward. We need only present recent history. Concern for a sound Gospel witness, based upon sound doctrine, led our Synod to leave the Synodical Conference slightly over a dozen years ago. At that time the call of like-minded Lutherans all over America was heard and our Synod made an important decision. Through an expanded Home Mission program it would establish confessionally sound congregations throughout America. The slogan "every state by '78" was a dream then. It is a near reality today. WELS congregations have been established in all but four states. Almost every major population center in the country has at least one of our Scripturally-committed congregations.

As we stand on the threshold of '78, the first phase of mission expansion has been virtually achieved. During the dozen years that brought us from the status of a Midwestern church to a national church, the prime emphasis has naturally been on growth -- growth in manpower and number of missions. Our Synodical institutions were equipped through successful fund-raising to do the job of putting a pastor in every parish and a teacher in every classroom. The General Board for Home Missions working hand in hand with the Board of Trustees, the Conference of Presidents and the Stewardship Office found ways of raising the needed capital to put a roof over every mission pastor and a steeple over every mission congregation. Our South Atlantic District was born out of the mission boom of the 1960 's and early '70's. So too were the thriving mission fronts now firmly established all over America.

The Challenge for "Real" Missionwork

As with every "giant leap forward" there are ramifications scarcely anticipated at the outset. Burgeoning success in one area may be matched by a serious lag in another. It is my opinion that we face such a situation in the area of equipping our new missions to communicate effectively. In saying this I see no cause to point fingers in the direction of any institution, board, committee or individual. This problem is the natural consequence of God's grace in leading us from being a regional church body in 1961 to the real possibility of growing into a national church body in the 1980's and 1990's.

I say "possibility" because the hard facts are that the preponderance of WELS members and congregations are still located today in those states which 60 years ago united to form the Wisconsin Synod -- Wisconsin, Michigan, and Minnesota. The total baptized membership of our South Atlantic District is only slightly more than that of Emmanuel Lutheran of New London, Wisconsin.

In this imbalance lies the challenge. Our nationwide grid of "confessional outposts" must grow. In the past we have placed the emphasis on the multiplication of congregations. We must now be equally interested in the multiplication within already established mission fields. Having gathered all the misplaced Lutherans that are to be had in a given community, our missions need to gird themselves for the difficult task of gathering the unchurched who are not automatically comfortable with our Lutheran, Midwestern, or German-American heritage. In no sense is this a call to abandon one single jot or tittle of God's inerrant Word. It is a challenge to be progressively attuned to the very real needs of the mission pastor and his congregation as they plan the Sunday service, organize the Sunday School, put together a youth ministry, and seek to get the whole church membership active in the soul-building process of searching the Scriptures for themselves. It is a challenge to meet the needs of the mission pastor as he teaches instructional classes in Christian doctrine and goes about his pastoral rounds. While evangelism is the breakthrough, parish education is the follow through. When an athlete shows poor form in his follow through, he falls short of his goal. If our mission pastors, mission congregations and mission boards are looking for reasons why the investment of manpower and money has not always produced anticipated increase, the Holy Spirit is not to be faulted. As always, we should take a hard look at ourselves to see whether our "form" is free from habits and hitches ill-suited to the mission field.

The Challenge Presented by Changing Modes of Communication

There are cultural forces at work today that also must be considered in our thinking. The first generation raised on TV has now come of age. As fine penmanship declined in direct proportion to the rise in the use and popularity of the typewriter, so the old art of reading for reading's sake is now giving place more and more to visually related communication. What reading we do is unconsciously shaped by the communication standards of the thirty second commercial and the five word bumper sticker. It should be obvious to us that the printed material published over a generation ago (or in imitation of a former generation) is no longer as effective today as it once was to a growing number of people. It should also be obvious that what we offer to the unchurched public today to communicate and educate must be more visual than it once was. This means our publications should reinforce words with pictures, graphs, and appealing layouts. Failing to do so is opting for non-communication.

The Challenge of Switching Over to a More Readable Bible

Another phenomenon, not unrelated to the former, is the restless search in the English-speaking Christian world for a suitable replacement for the venerated King James Version of the Bible. Understandably, our Synod has been wary of many attempts in the recent past to render the Word into modern English because the translators revealed a strong liberal bias in their choice of words. As a result the KJV has remained until recently the de facto Bible of our Synod. Even in our District, a full third of those polled in a recent survey looked upon the KJV as no less than the "final authority". Prospects for a suitable modern translation have brightened considerably within the same decade that our Synod exploded its mission outreach. Three translations have received favorable reviews, the New American Standard Bible (NASB), Beck's "An American Translation", and the New International Version (NIV). This last translation, the NIV, promises to meet the crucial three requirements of (a) reliability, (b) availability, and (c) usability. In a poll printed in the 1975 *Synod Convention Proceedings* (p. 142) our Synod's Commission on Christian Literature reported that in all six categories polled (impact, understandability, suitability for worship, overall impression, suitability for memorization, and stimulation for further reading) the NIV was consistently favored by laymen over the KJV, NASB, Living Bible, Phillip's, and the TEV (Good News for Modern Man). The New Testament of the NIV is in print. Its Old Testament complement will be available before the end of the present decade. What has been already been put in print (for example, Isaiah) matches the high standards set by the New Testament. Our Seminary faculty as a whole and Prof. John Jeske in particular are working with the NIV translators to insure a faithful transmittal of the Biblical Hebrew into modern English.

What We Need In Order to Do Our Work Effectively

When a person puts these facts together: (1) the challenge to win and edify the un-churched American on the mission frontier (and in the Midwest too); (2) the emergence of a new kind of TV-shaped reading public that renders old tools of communication increasingly obsolete, and (3) the very real possibility (yes, inevitability) that our Synod will soon make regular use of the NIV Bible translation, then it becomes quite clear that today we stand at one of those crucial crossroads. In my opinion we need the following items for our parish education program of the next two decades, using (a) the NIV translation, (B) modern English idiom, and (c) a format which takes into full consideration our modern habits of communication:

- (1) a new catechism,
- (2) a confirmation instruction curriculum which goes beyond the catechism to adequately, thoroughly and interestingly teach sound Christian doctrine,
- (3) a new Bible History for the upper grade children,
- (4) a new Sunday School series for pre-school through twelfth (sic!) grade,
- (5) a multi-year adult Bible study curriculum,
- (6) a multi-year youth Bible study curriculum,
- (7) a supplement to our *Lutheran Hymnal* which includes many of the fine hymns written in this century,
- (8) a new set of service books to replace the present Agenda, Lectionary, and Liturgy,
- (9) a Bible information curriculum for adult instruction, and
- (10) a layman's Bible commentary or handbook.

There may be differences of opinion on the precise composition of our parish education publication shopping list, but the question remains: Will we seize the opportunity now to prepare adequately for a fully equipped program of parish instruction in the 1980's and 1990's, or will we wait? If we are not to delay several formidable obstacles must be overcome.

The Obstacle of a Non-publishing Heritage

Our Synod has not been a "publishing" Synod. Person for person we have produced far less Christian literature than church bodies of comparable size or much smaller. This is partially due to the fact that we leaned heavily in this area (as in missions) on our former big sister in the Synodical Conference. It is also true that individual initiative in the area of publishing has not been encouraged. Of all major seminaries ours is one of the very few that do not have an active program of sabbatical leave for writing and publishing. The same holds true for Northwestern College and Dr. Martin Luther College. Our recent confessional struggles have made us wary of undisciplined theological publication. We tend to forget that Luther himself was a voluminous writer without being at the same time a heretic. In our Synod we have a strong feeling that things pertaining to the church's work must be commissioned for publication if they are to be written at all, a sentiment which has inhibited all but a handful of our clergy and teachers from publishing. Most of those who have shown personal initiative are men who have joined us from other Synods. Our District's own Pastor Julian Anderson is one of these. His essay to this Convention clearly outlines his personal commitment to effectively communicate "the truth which makes us free". He is absent from our Convention because he is following up his commitment with personal

appearances elsewhere in our Synod to make his publication of the New Testament in Everyday American English better known.

The Obstacle of Time

A second factor is a lack of awareness by most of us concerning the sheer amount of time consumed in any major quality publishing effort. The fine book of pastoral theology *The Shepherd Under Christ* was proposed in early 1970, yet it was not on the market until four years later. Our present three-year K-8 Sunday School curriculum took no less than eight years to produce. A revision of the *Enchiridion* of *Luther's Small Catechism* was first proposed in 1971. This 21 page item, for a variety of reasons (mostly editing), is still not available in printed form for general use. Every major published work takes planning time, writing time, editing time, and publishing time. It is simply not true that we can come up with a good idea for a book today and transform it into a new, quality publication in a year. Four years seems to be the absolute minimum.

The Obstacle of Limited Full-time Resources

The third factor is available resources. Our Publishing House, our Board for Parish Education, our Commission on Christian Literature -- everyone charged with the planning, writing, editing and publishing of printed material for the Synod just doesn't have the means or manpower to do more than they are doing now.

At a recent visit to Synodical headquarters in Milwaukee I asked a number of searching questions both of the staff of the Publishing House and the staff of the Synod Board for Parish Education. The Publishing House is presently expanding its printing capabilities by installing a number of small offset presses. But it has little room for storage, an all-important factor when considering the publication of a significant number of new items. Market-wise our Publishing House has not not been able to break out of its narrow WELS constituency to a significant degree. The present editor remarked that a soundly written, attractive Sunday School curriculum based on the NIV translation might do the trick. The recent publication of Pastor Krug's NIV-based harmony of the Passion sold well outside our Synodical circles. While our prime intent as a Synod should not be to publish for the world, we should not shy away from the potential of placing good, sound Lutheran material in the same marketplace with Eerdmann's and Zondervan, especially when such an expanded market will better equip our Publishing House to financially underwrite the cost of serving us better.

But such material, even for our own constituency, must be prepared. The staff at the Synod BPE office admits that only one major publishing project at a time can be handled with present resources and manpower. The calling of a Secretary of Publications, authorized as a top priority at the 1975 Synod Convention will help with the present load, but would not meet the kind of publishing thrust that this essay is calling for. Soliciting part-time help from men in the preaching and teaching ministry has not proved to be a solution either. As recently as 1971 the Synod passed a resolution authorizing the Synod BPE to engage pastors on a leave-of-absence basis, but the resolution has not produced the number of willing volunteers necessary to meet even the present pace of publication. A major thrust in publishing would require full-time authors and editors working together with the Synod's present staff. Under present budgetary restraints, however, it is hard to imagine such a major expansion of the publishing staff. Recent Synodical history clearly shows that our Synod is reluctant, even beyond purely budgetary concerns, to create new full-time staff positions of any kind.

The Obstacle of False Conservatism

The fourth factor is a deep-rooted conservative attitude on the part of a significant number of pastors, teachers and laymen toward change. While a steadfast attitude of resistance to change in matters of divine truth is unquestioned and absolutely necessary, there is always a certain "spillover" of such steadfast conservatism into areas of methodology and approach. One hears it often said, "First outward change, then doctrinal change". How often Luther must have heard those same sentiments, yet it did not stop him from giving his generation a Bible, a Catechism and a worship service that was an integral and compatible part of their daily life. Going a further step backward in history, it is a matter of New Testament record that Paul adapted himself freely in methodology and approach as the occasion warranted. He used courtly form before Felix and Agrippa. He used

the Athenian forum while among the worldly philosophers. And he used the synagogues of his countrymen when among the Jews of the dispersion. In using the Old Testament Scriptures Paul and the other Apostles were not bound to an authorized version of the Greek Septuagint. A study of Old Testament quotations in the New Testament will readily show that many translations, even personal paraphrases, were used by the Holy Spirit. Following the law of love, the first Christian missionaries lived by the principle: "We shall be all things to all men, that by all means we might save some."

A Suggested Approach

What can be done? I firmly believe that the bread and butter factor, limited full-time resources, can be overcome by a task force approach similar to the one marshaled in the mid-1960's to renovate and expand our educational institutions. In the past we have asked for dollars to buy brick and mortar. How much more fitting that we ask our people to support financially the nuts and bolts of a full, modern parish education program. The money that would be raised could pay for men to be called from the parish and teaching ministries to work full-time as authors and editors in each major publishing effort. These positions need not and should not be permanent. Far better that the men be called back into the field when their work is completed, much as we call a Synod President back into the parish ministry when he declines to continue in his office. The present Synod staff (regardless of what board or commission), now charged with the oversight and production of Christian literature, could serve in such a publication thrust as resource men and consultants while they continue to "mind the shop". Money raised could also be used to expand the storage capacity of the Publishing House and to provide seed money for printing, stocking, and publicizing each book, booklet, video tape, cassette or film. Even with an ambitious ten point program such as I have outlined above, the total goal of a fund-raising effort would be considerably less in dollars and cents than the ceiling of the Grace 125 Thankoffering.

Reluctance toward change and hesitancy to publish would lessen if the facts were given a proper forum for examination and discussion. If the three challenges facing the WELS in the area of mission expansion which I have outlined in the beginning of this essay were presented, for example, in an essay at the 1977 Synod Convention and the whole subject made the theme of that Convention, the remaining factor, lack of accurate information about the time and effort involved in a major publishing thrust, might also be remedied.

Conclusion

In closing I will admit a certain urgency prompts me. As a mission pastor myself I know how much time is spent trying to create a confessional Lutheran congregation in a part of the country so unlike the area that raised and schooled me. I know how many truly useful things I would like to have on my bookshelf and how many hours have been spent trying this and that in an effort to modify the existing tools for parish education which we now have. I also see and hear how my brethren struggle with frustration, often unable to put their finger on the cause. Our grid of confessional Lutheran outposts is a gift. A reliable contemporary translation of the Bible in our time is a gift. The media opportunities for communication of the Word are also gifts. I feel quite strongly that these gifts are talents given to us by the Lord of the Church. He expects us as His Gospel servants to bring forth the interest which His grace deserves. I don't want to see these talents buried. Do you?