

Our Mission and Our Resources

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The theme of this presentation has a fine ring to it – promises much – the mind leaps ahead anticipating the direction the speaker will take, especially in view of WELS history, past and present. It has a broad sweep to it, yet it sounds practical. But in developing this given theme we could not help but note some dangers as well as benefits. Among the dangers – a philosophical abstraction in the term "Mission," quite popular recently to denote some rather broad, visionary and yet vague approach to the purpose of the church, quite subject to what Peter might call "private interpretation," – also a bit self-centered: OUR Mission, OUR Resources, could be a hint of synodical chauvinism – also a bit media-oriented, centered on resources (also quite an all-inclusive word), indicating material resources as the answer perhaps? manpower? money? --- and YET the theme promises benefit – getting to basics as we confront practical realities in terms of synodical budgets – WHAT is our MISSION? – formally, really, practically – and today, specifically? --- What are our real resources? generally as individual Christians? basically? and existentially, that is NOW with a capital N-O-W? Speaking to men in the know, to some with greater parish experience, some with newer and perhaps more unique experience, I presume to lead in examining

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I. OUR MISSION – as a Synod, what is it?

Well phrased is the statement formally adopted by the Synod: "The continuing purpose of the WELS, as a gathering of Christians, is to serve all people in God's world with the Gospel of Jesus Christ on the basis of the Holy Scriptures." This purpose leads so naturally to the objectives which follow, and, the formal goals adopted by the Synod which in each case, note carefully, center on the Gospel of salvation for souls, one by one. This is our Mission, our formal goal, or perhaps better termed our SOUL GOAL, S-O-U-L reaching from souls won by the Gospel to souls to be won by the Gospel.

A disturbing question, however, comes to mind as we reflect on the day to day life of the Synod, of its congregations, and of its members, clergy and laymen. How apparent is this soul goal in the life and action of each group? For example, how apparent in the life of your congregation's program, Voters' Assembly agenda, or even in its formal statement to the world, namely its constitution, is the real SOUL GOAL of the church, the true MISSION of your congregation? What does your constitution say about it, if anything? And most say nothing of the real purpose of the congregation.

May we venture to suggest that we tend in each case to concentrate on and to relate more readily to what we may call Survival Goals in church life, those goals that enable the institution to survive? For example, in mission congregations is it not much easier to relate to the tangible goals of gaining in communicant membership, getting land and buildings, becoming self-supporting? In established congregations is it not easier to concentrate on meeting the budget, holding our membership level, keeping up day school enrollment, hitting synodical average for missions, paying off the debt? These goals center on keeping the institution alive more than on meeting the Lord's mission.

In fact, would it be far from the truth to say that survival goals take up the major portion of our time and interest, and material gifts in congregational life – perhaps in synodical life?

Of course it is true that reaching survival goals are part of reaching our Soul Goal. Our usual defense of and excuse for being concerned about them is that they enable us to reach souls. But I fear that a very vague and infrequent statement of our real soul goal in congregational life allows survival goals to be considered to be most important. In fact, if we reach them, it can be considered a nearly adequate fulfillment of our soul goal of

servicing and evangelizing all people. It is easy to rationalize our preoccupation with what are really survival goals by speaking of recruitment of new members as Evangelism; of funding the approved budget as Stewardship; of maintaining a happy membership with various programs as true Fellowship, but fail to really reach out to attain our true mission to all people in God's World!

So easily survival goals become primary goals:

- at the synodical level:
 - balanced budget, rather than a balanced aggressive mission program;
 - keep up synodical school enrollment rather than match manpower resources with mission tasks;
 - enter new states or countries rather than meet the challenge of unchurched fields whenever and wherever the Lord points to them, and to develop more carefully the newly-sown fields.
- at the congregational level:
 - keep up membership count rather than train active evangelists;
 - meet local budget rather than study overall program of nourishing individuals as priests of God;
 - satisfy synod budget goals rather than make MISSION the breath of life of every congregational effort;
 - concern for local congregational loyalty and autonomy at possible expense of effective cooperative church action.
- at the personal level:
 - for our laity, concern for spiritual feeding of self and one's own at possible expense of worldwide mission of church;
 - for us as clergy, preoccupation with one's own prejudices which turn one against methods which may be more effective in attaining the soul goal of the church.

As put by a modern critic of the church scene, "Internalization of attention is an outstanding characteristic of a group centered on survival goals". How would the agenda of your last Voters' Assembly stack up on the basis of that criterion? Another characteristic of groups of individuals dedicated to survival goals is a protective defensiveness, quick to attack, not the soul goal presented for their consideration in proposals for wider church work, but to attack the methods suggested to reach such goals. Methods are always an easy target even though as a rule you can find no scripture passage either to commend or condemn them. In this way one can continue to pursue survival goals with a sense of righteousness.

But, Oh, how good the Lord has been to us right now in aiding us to avoid the trap of centering on our own selfish survival goals as a Synod, as congregation, as individuals! Right NOW the Lord has jolted us out of survival goal preoccupation, I believe, by most dramatic reminders of our soul goal – our real mission. And you as Visiting Elders, can help in exposing all of our congregations and members to those dramatic reminders.

We cite the cry from the West Cameroons of a group of confessional Christians pleading for more intense training in Gospel truths that they may more effectively bring it to their countrymen – of a continent laid before our feet in South America – of sixty groups of individual souls, in areas of our land with no WELS congregation, asking for the opportunity to be the nucleus of a confessional cadre for proclamation of the pure Gospel to the unchurched and as a refuge for the concerned – of many letters on the desk of Pres. Naumann, of DMB chairmen, on my desk asking for pastoral leadership to train the writers to be more effective witnesses and priests for the MISSION of God in areas remote from WELS pastoral care. **THE MISSION IS SO CLEAR FOR US OF WELS TODAY** – our land, the world calls for our clear confessional witness.

SURVIVAL GOALS OR OUR SOUL GOAL – which shall predominate in our district and conference meetings? – in our church councils and voters' assemblies? – in the prayers of our laity?

We have a duty to hold before our people the vision of the SOUL GOAL presented to us by our Lord NOW in such striking fashion that they may lift their eyes heavenward, so that survival goals may take their

rightful place as handmaids to our MISSION of making disciples, and not as a "mission" to enable us to survive as an institution.

II. OUR RESOURCES – What the Lord requires, the Lord provides! So in our MISSION. Not truly OUR Resources; but Resources given to us. This is so apparent as we list the resources needed and available to us as we face our MISSION.

First of all, THE GOSPEL – not encased in an untouchable book, but in a book in which we live and move – a book whose message is a precious heritage to be upheld and lived. A heritage to us in WELS especially in the form of its presentation – not a kind of sterile dogmatic recitation of facts and beliefs, but a living plan of God, lived out in history, among man, for all men - this is the kind of Gospel presentation laid before us by our spiritual father Luther, and, more closely for us in our Synod, by our Synodical fathers, such as August Pieper and J. P. Koehler and their worthy successors. A free Gospel, not bound by human statements and resolutions, but presented in God's inspired inerrant Word of salvation, and thus bound only by His love for us.

Born of this Gospel, another resource for us of WELS is the FELLOWSHIP of the brotherhood in Christ and His Word worked by the Spirit – for us that unique unanimity in doctrine even attested to by unbiased religious researchers – a fellowship based on God's truth which inevitably leads to an openness and frankness in our human relationships within the Synod, leads to trust and cooperation which multiplies strength and effort proportionately as we seek to pursue our joint Mission.

Add to this EVANGELICAL LEADERSHIP, not power politics or bureaucratic indifference, evangelical leadership as evidenced in the unique pastoral character of our Synodical presidency, eminently displayed in the role and actions of the incumbent – of our Seminary faculty in its brotherly relationship with its students – of our District presidents and visiting elders in their consciousness of their predominantly pastoral, not dogmatic, administration, or institutional role.

The Lord right NOW is showering upon us also TRAINED MANPOWER, well trained, in unprecedented numbers. In the next 8 years conservative estimates of 450 pastoral graduates (more than half of the estimated clergy at that time – pray for the continuation of the evangelical, Bible-based training given them by the Sem – for if not, Woe is us!) This year 95 NWC freshmen, 68 WLS Juniors, give evidence that this blessing will continue for some time.

And backing them up, TRAINED LAITY in increasingly involved numbers. Perhaps a bit of uneasiness is setting in as you remember the number of laymen in your acquaintance or membership who do not seem to qualify, when you remember the sparsely attended Bible Classes, evangelism volunteers who are not there, the lousy attendance at the last circuit meeting. And yet even here, as we deplore our own failures as "equippers of the saints," and the indifference of so many, we are told by researchers that our WELS laity more frequently speak of the SAVIOR to others than any other group of Lutheran Christians. The Spirit is at work reminding our people of the treasure they have in Christ and His pure Word, and they are giving an answer of the hope that is in them.

What tremendous resources available, and in such measure! And we cannot speak any differently when we come to MATERIAL RESOURCES. We have them, and by we I mean all of us, clergy and laity. And here as well the Spirit has moved our people to respond, not only for themselves, or their own congregation. The per communicant contribution of WELS communicants to benevolences, for missions and other non-congregational causes, is higher than that of any other major Lutheran body, and by a fairly wide margin. And at the synodical level the effective use of these resources is being maximized, especially when it comes to capital funds, through the counsel of financially experienced laymen on the Coordinating Council and on the fiscal staff. And yet we must state frankly that the specter of inflation casts a pall over the future as to our operating budget. But of that others will speak later.

Financial clouds will probably always bedevil the picture of mission work, but we dare not permit them to blot out the sun-bathed picture the Lord spreads before us, and especially for us right NOW. Truly, as has been said, God has put it all together for us of the WELS right NOW. Our situation is most unique in a religious

world wringing its hands in near desperation as it views its chance of survival. Could it be that it is because many are zeroed in on survival goals to survive as socio-religious institutions, to please the world, or attempt to be relevant to worldly problems? May we ever remember that the Mission of the Church is not Survival, but the Survival of the Church is Mission.

Let us view that true mission, our Soul Goal, which God has placed before us, an assignment commensurate with that given the disciples on Ascension Day, for the WORLD lies before us.

The Mission stands forth clearly, not only as an abstract goal, but in tangible assignments and specific calls both domestically and worldwide – so tangible that there should be no danger of being sidetracked by survival goals, neither at synodical, nor congregational, nor personal levels of action.

The Resources more than match the Mission:

The Gospel – evangelically presented according to the free WELS heritage;

The Fellowship – unique in unanimity of doctrine and thus united in Mission and cooperative as to method;

Trained Manpower – in historically unprecedented number, both clergy and laity;

Material Resources available, awaiting channeling, for the love of Gospel-taught, Spirit-motivated hearts awaits direction in our Synod.

We can and will be enabled by the Spirit to pull ourselves out of the rut of survival goals by not looking sideways and down at the grubby and cramping walls of too little money, too little involvement, too little vision, but by holding before ourselves and our people the clear picture of the Mission of the Church, the Soul Goal. That is a key part of your work with clergy and congregations – to truly activate the final commitment of the synodical statement of Purpose and Objectives: "To achieve these objectives, the members of the WELS commit themselves to employ their total, combined resources in the most God-pleasing and effective manner."

OUR MISSION IS MATCHED BY GOD-GIVEN RESOURCES!

MAY OUR SYNOD-GIVEN RESOURCES MATCH GOD'S MISSION!