

THE PASTOR'S ROLE IN BUILDING MISSION AWARENESS IN A CONGREGATION

Mission Seminar
January 24, 1975

Anybody with his eyes open can see that the church is in trouble in these last decades of the 20th Century. No one can doubt that the 20th Century Church has stained more glass and laid more brick and installed more carpeting and spent more money than any other church in the history of Christianity. Yet all around us we see that the church has come upon evil days. The impressive membership growth statistics of the '50's and '60's have reversed themselves. Church attendance is down. Mission expansion is down sharply. Perhaps worst of all, the church's influence is low, and is getting lower. Its voice is being ignored. People -- even church members -- are making the big decisions of life and death in blithe disregard of the church's opinions and pronouncements. Perhaps it ought not surprise us that many people look upon the 20th Century church as a harmless antique which is occupied chiefly with naming babies and marrying and burying people. In the opinion of many, the church today is interested mainly in preserving itself and has therefore pretty well outlived its usefulness.

It's in this difficult age for the church that God has called you to live. He has His eye on you as leaders in His church at this critical time in her long history. Humanly speaking, the direction your congregation moves or its indirection, the progress your congregation makes or the way it spins its wheels, will depend to a very large extent on how you understand your role as pastors. The topic assigned to me relates to the pastor's role in helping the congregation to be what God has called it to be, or more specifically

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When I met with the Day 5 Committee for preliminary discussion of this topic, we agreed that this could be a pretty short presentation or a somewhat longer one, depending on how we defined "mission awareness." If by "building mission awareness" we refer only to the pastor's work of disseminating information on the work the Synod is doing, why, it's not going to take this speaker very long to describe the pastor's role. As a loyal son of the Wisconsin Synod, you'll preach about the Synod, include references to its mission program in your pastoral letters, encourage the congregation to conduct a mission fair every couple years, and use synod-produced filmstrips in all congrega-

tional societies regularly. I'm thankful that in that preliminary meeting the committee members stated frankly that that's not how they understood my assignment. One even remarked that it would be an insult to you to make a presentation as shallow as that.

This presentation will therefore operate with a wider definition of "mission awareness." The mission awareness we want to build in the members of our congregations is more than the understanding that we presently have three missionaries working in Medellin, Colombia, South America, and that Anak Agung Dipa Pandji Tisna has begun preaching in Singaradja, Bali. You see, your purpose as pastors is not just to build loyal supporters for the Synod, but to build people for God. In order to train people for their real mission in life, the pastor will want

- I. to acquaint lay Christians with their God-given ministry: not to be good church members, but disciple-priests, and then
- II. to acquaint these disciple-priests with the opportunities God supplies for fulfilling this ministry.

I

One of the deadliest temptations that threatens every parish pastor is to accept the image people give him. In the eyes of the majority of people, the preacher is the minister in the congregation, the only minister. It's his job to preach to people, who in turn are to help him carry out his ministry.

Christ sees things differently. You see, He has called the lay Christians of our congregations, as He once called some fishermen: "Follow Me!" The parish pastor dare never forget that his big job is to take the lead in making the congregation what God intended it to be: a disciple factory, no more, no less.

The Scripture confers many titles on disciples of Christ. They're subjects of a King, children of a Father, branches on a Vine. This morning I'd like to emphasize one title which is immensely significant for your pastoral ministry. Christ called His disciples "priests." God's disciple-priests have a ministry, and an important one. As priests, they have direct access to God; they're entitled to bring sacrifices of praise, a privilege which back in Old Testament times only sons of Aaron had. Disciple-priests talk to God about people, and they talk to people about God.

But Christ's disciple-priests need to be made aware of their ministry. You see, the most important sermons preached in your congregation each week are not the ones where one person is the preacher and several dozen or several hundred are the congregation. The most important sermons are the ones where one person is the preacher and one person is the congregation. If you are going to do any sort of job building mission awareness in your congregation, this is where you've got to begin -- acquainting Christians with their God-given role. But what a tragedy when a pastor pays lip-service to the doctrine of the universal priesthood, and then proceeds to take over most of the planning and the decision-making in the congregation himself. Your constant concern as pastors has to be: how can I best equip God's disciple-priests to fulfil their high calling? Again, the obvious first step is to acquaint them with it.

II

By interesting coincidence, this topic is being discussed today in the Synod's 125th anniversary year. Perhaps you know that when the Synod was organized back in 1850 its original name was "Das Evangelische Lutherische Ministerium von Wisconsin." What does that name tell you, besides that the Synod was probably German in origin? At its founding, the Synod was not primarily an association of disciple-priests who had gathered into congregations, but an association of pastors. Surely we're glad that those days of a "pastor-synod" are behind us. But if we're not to resurrect those days, you'll want to talk to disciple-priests about their ministry; even more, you'll want to offer them opportunities to practice it, to fulfil it. If you don't take the lead in doing this, it's doubtful anybody will. Congregations have a way of perpetuating the status quo.

Some of your work of training lay Christians to practice their priesthood is pretty much a one-man operation. I'm thinking right now of the initial visits you'll make in the homes of people -- either at the time you enter your first congregation (say, 6 months from now), or when new families enter your congregation. What an appropriate time for you to remind them that as members of the congregation they don't exist for the sake of the congregation, but that the congregation exists to help them be what God has called them to be.

I'd like to offer you two examples of what happens when a pastor, in his initial contact with people, forgets that he's talking to disciple-priests. These two instances actually happened; neither is hypothetical. About 15 years

ago, prior to our break with Missouri, some people with a Missouri Synod background moved to a different state and joined a Wisconsin Synod congregation, although they had previously visited a Missouri Synod congregation in their new area which was closer to their new home. They later explained why they did not join that Missouri Synod congregation. They said: "When that pastor called on us, he seemed more interested in what we could do for his congregation than in what his congregation might do for us. There was a lot of talk about 'We're a young congregation and could certainly use members,' and very little talk about what membership in that congregation could do for our spiritual life."

Example #2. A family with a demonstrated record of Christian commitment was being visited by the pastor of a congregation in the area to which they had moved. Knowing what kind of Christian family this was, the pastor remarked: "We can certainly use another tither in our building program." The family did not join that congregation. The pastor's initial visit can serve to assure the prospective member that the pastor understands what the proper relationship between member and congregation is to be.

The sermons you preach ought regularly strike the note: "God is still calling to His disciple-priests: 'Follow Me!'" We call on Christians to worship not just for what they might get out of it, but because God has said: "Let the Word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom." We urge Christians to bring liberal mission offerings not so much to help the congregation reach its mission goal, but because the Lord has called out to us: "Into all the world!" We support the Synod's worker-training program not primarily out of synodical loyalty, but because we have heard the Lord saying to His disciple-priests: "The things thou hast heard of me ... the same commit thou to faithful men who shall be able to teach others also." "Feed My Lambs," He has told us, and what more incentive do we need to be active in training the young?

There is, however, always a built-in disadvantage to having the pastor be the only one to urge lay Christians to practice their priesthood. There's going to be somebody who will regard the appeal as a gimmick, who will suspect that the pastor's real interest is to help the congregation run more efficiently. The critic may say: "After all, he's paid to talk like that."

I think that some of the best training in the exercise of the privileges of

the priesthood is given when the pastor works through groups of members.

To illustrate, let's take three vital activities within the congregation:

1. studying the congregation's outreach; (I mean studying from the Scripture what God is calling the congregation to do at this particular stage in her history. In my experience, this study can best be done by the Stewardship Committee, and then by the Church Council).
2. determining what the congregation's outreach is to be; in our congregational form of government, this function will be carried out by the voters assembly.
3. implementing the congregation's planned outreach; obviously this function can be properly carried out only if the entire membership is involved.

Let's look at the first of these three vital activities: studying the congregation's outreach. If a congregation is to carry out his high assignment, somebody should regularly be asking: "Is our congregation on the right track? What should it be doing that it isn't now doing?" Now who do you think ought to be asking those questions? The pastor? Why should it be he? It isn't his congregation; he's just the chief foot-washer, serving God's disciple-priests. I think the congregation's Committee for Stewardship is the ideal group to initiate this study. (I tend to feel about Stewardship Committee members the way Pastor Kelm feels about youth counselors: don't let the selection of these people up to chance. Have them appointed, not elected, and let such men be appointed who are interested not only in what the congregation has been, but in what it might be if the Holy Spirit were really having His way with it). All right. This group meets regularly with the pastor to ask: what is God's assignment for our congregation? The pastor will help these earnest disciple-priests through study of the Scripture to recognize that in God's plan the congregation is not an island existing for itself, but that God has given it several important functions: nurture, outreach, service. Let me show you just a few paths on which this committee's study might lead it.

As it studies the Lord's will for the congregation, it will hear the Lord's voice: "When thou art converted, strengthen thy brethren." Let the committee then ask: "What are we doing to strengthen the bond of fellowship among our members? What more could we do to integrate the new member into our congre-

gational family? Apart from the Sunday service, what are we doing to nurture the faith of our members? What can we do to help those of our members who apparently are having difficulty with their faith and are drifting away from Christ?"

The committee will hear Jesus say: "Whosoever shall confess Me before men, him will I confess..." Since it's only rarely that the church meets the unbelieving world with a trained theologian present to speak for Christ, the committee might ask: "What are we doing to train disciple-priests to confess their faith before men?" In evaluating the congregation's activity, the committee will study its program of nurture.

When the congregation's work in Christian education is under review, questions like these may well be asked: What can be done to improve the calibre of our Sunday School program? of our Day School program? Does information about the congregation's educational program reach all homes on a regular basis? Are Sunday School parents visited at least annually by several disciple-priests to try to win their children for the Day School? And speaking of education and nurture, what help can the congregation offer its families, to strengthen the home life which is the backbone of the congregation?

As the Stewardship Committee continues to measure the congregation's performance in the light of God's Word it will hear the Lord's statement: "Ye shall be My witnesses ... in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the uttermost parts of the earth." The pastor will encourage those disciple-priests to ask some perceptive questions. "Are mission calls being made by anyone besides the pastor? Is evangelism training being offered? Can we honestly say that our congregation is serving this community with the Gospel? How many years have passed since we last conducted an area canvass? What channels are there in the congregation besides the Sunday sermon for channeling information re the Synod's Home Missions and World Missions programs? Should new channels be created?" The congregation's study of its outreach must be an ongoing one.

God has called His disciple-priests to serve, to serve their fellow men. Our Lord has told us: "Deal thy bread to the hungry." As the Stewardship Committee evaluates the congregation's activity, let it ask: "Is our congregation actively serving those whom the Lord calls 'the least of these My brethren' ? Does a fair proportion of our annual income go to relieve suffering in the world? Is

our congregation's program of Christian service largely self-centered?"

If, as I have assumed, this sort of study is done by members of the Committee for Stewardship, its conclusions would be passed on to the Church Council. I could envision that the result might very well be a restudy and possible revision of the congregation's constitution. Constitutions have a way of being long on details of organization and procedure, and short on the goals God sets for His disciple-priests.

When the congregation, probably in a voters meeting toward the end of the year, reaches the crucial stage of determining its Christian response to the Lord's call, the pastor's efforts with the Stewardship Committee and with the Church Council could very well bear visible fruit. God's disciple-priests will have done their homework in preparation for that important meeting. They will have prepared for it with earnest thought and prayer. The agenda for that important congregational meeting will reflect God's priorities.

One often wonders: "What impression would an outsider get if he were to attend this congregational meeting? Would he see that we know the primary goals of a congregation are nurture, outreach, service, and that the secondary goals (gaining members, erecting and maintaining buildings, supporting an organization) only serve the primary goals? Or would the visitor possibly see that we're majoring in minors, that we're bogged down with housekeeping projects?" When the congregation is at adopting its new year's program of work, God's priests will urge that spiritual considerations be given a fair hearing, and not only financial considerations. Is an honorable share of the congregation's income being channeled out of the congregation for work elsewhere? I remember what a thrill it was when some years ago at a budget-setting meeting one of the Lord's disciple-priests asked: "What percentage of this proposed budget will leave our congregation?" When the question was answered, he continued: "How does that compare with last year?"

An important area where the pastor can help God's disciple-priests comes after the voters assembly has determined its response to the Lord's call for the new year. The congregation may have passed excellent resolutions, but if the resolutions don't result in action, what you get is spinning of wheels instead of forward movement. The congregation must now implement its planned outreach.

Here again the pastor will work through groups of members to acquaint them with God-given opportunities to carry out their ministry.

What's needed now, if the resolutions are going to result in action, is a consistent program of every-home contact. Each person in the congregation should be confronted personally with Christ's claim on him. In my experience, the very best way is by means of an Every Member Visit, in which teams of two trained Christians visit each home in the congregation with a prepared message. Here, in the informal attitude of Christian give-and-take, important matters of faith and life can be discussed. There are shortcuts which may seem attractive to some congregations, but the excellence of the Every Member Visit as the basic educational tool for reaching the entire membership cannot be questioned seriously.

In conclusion, let me urge you in your congregations not to set low goals for God's disciple-priests. Calling people to be pew-sitters, good church members, simply will not do. You build mission awareness in a congregation by building concerned Christian people, people who are interested primarily not in St. John's Congregation and its structures (the day after Judgment there isn't going to be a St. John's Congregation!) but who are aware of the ministry God has assigned to them and who need help for fulfilling this ministry. God help you to supply that!

John C. Jeske