

ANNUAL REPORT OF THE WORLD MISSIONS COMMITTEE CHAIRMAN AND DIRECTOR

The Forty-sixth Annual Conference of the Association of Free Lutheran Congregations, assembled in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, June 10-13, 2008.

Our conference theme, “From Him, Through Him, To Him” from Romans 11:36, reminds us that we are indebted to the Lord for everything. Our focus must be on Him and not on us. Is our focus in ministry on what we can do, or on what God can do?

From the beginning, the focus of free Lutheranism has been on God and spiritual life in Him, rather than on manmade external structure. When we focus on authentic spiritual life, those who are alive will create the needed organizational structure for their congregational life and mission works to thrive. When this is our focus and spiritual life ceases to exist, there will be no false assurance through the continuation of an externally supported structure.

If we focus on external structure, there is the possibility that it could generate spiritual life, but there is no guarantee. Our forefathers in the Lutheran Free Church believed that a focus on an externally supported church structure actually hindered spiritual life. Their convictions were not hypothetical ideas cooked up in the laboratory of unreality. Their convictions were based on their observations of the deadness in the church to which they belonged. We read about those convictions in the recent publication, “Free and Living Congregations, The Dream That Would Not Die.”

In the 1800s the Lutheran church was the established religion of Norway. The nation was officially Lutheran. The church was a department of state, and pastors were royal officials.

As a young man growing up in Norway, Sverdrup was critical of the state church. He was sympathetic to the Church Reform movement, which sought to correct problems caused by the control the state had over the church. He felt the root problem was that the state church hindered spiritual life in the congregations.

Sverdrup was deeply concerned that the state discouraged spiritual activity among the laymen. Lay preaching and testimony were in many instances prohibited. Laymen had no responsibility for either the temporal or spiritual welfare of the congregation. Laymen were not even permitted to take an offering for missions in their own congregations until legislation was passed specifically permitting them to do so.

On the other hand, the state church benevolently cared for all the needs of the church such as training pastors, building and keeping up the churches, and paying the pastors' salaries. The state was responsible for the religious education of the young, and confirmation was compulsory. Some saw these as great benefits that the church should not give up. But Sverdrup saw such care by the state as nothing less than spiritual bondage. True freedom is not freedom from responsibility but freedom to be servants of the Lord. Such dependency on the state kept believers from spiritual maturity by not allowing them to shoulder responsibility for their own congregation. The state church had a devastating effect on the congregation. The state church, Andreas Helland writes, “impaired the will to work and had thus retarded spiritual progress” in the congregation.

Sverdrup advocated that the congregation be freed from the authority of the state. Responsibility for the affairs of the congregation should be placed in the hands of the laymen in order to encourage spiritual maturity. He admitted that by becoming

independent of the state, the congregation would lose much “in the way of ease and external advantages.” But this loss would be more than offset by what the congregation would gain. Sverdrup observed that shouldering responsibility for one's own congregation requires, “a little bit of the renunciation of flesh and blood in order to belong to a congregation; and even though this is just a small cross, it has already brought about considerable good effects.” As believers take up their cross and follow Jesus, even in a small way, they are on the path of spiritual maturity, and the congregation itself becomes strengthened.¹

Through prayer, study of the Scripture, careful observation and discussion, the World Missions Committee has come to the conclusion that much, if not most, of the work done by mission agencies around the world places a greater focus on funding and external structure and less on personal spiritual life.

God has promised to work through His Word and Spirit. He has made no promise to work through external structure. With this in mind, the World Missions Committee has laid out a vision for future AFLC mission work. The vision focuses on spiritual life rather than external structure. It will require the working of God's Spirit causing revival in the hearts of individuals both at home and on the mission field. Without revival and prayer the mission work under this vision will collapse. It will fall because it is not propped up with outside funding and structure.

As we focus on spiritual life, those who are saved and brought to new life will be moved by God: to mature and become spiritual leaders, to sacrificially support their local congregation and to reproduce, propagating the Gospel both locally and around the world.

Last year the AFLC Annual Conference requested the World Missions Committee to present a vision and goals for our future foreign mission work. This last year we have prayed and sought God's will concerning this vision. After the vision was developed we sent a team to each field to discuss it with those on the field. The Committee has presented it to the members of the Missions Corporation and we now present it to you for your approval. We fully expect that there will be some who question this vision as it no longer focuses on the external to which they are accustomed. Yet we have the conviction that this is the right direction for effective spiritual mission work resulting in fruit that lasts for eternity.

The Vision and Goals for Future Work

The World Missions Committee believes that time is short to reach many of the souls around the world. We also aware that we are closer to Christ's return than ever before. Therefore, we are compelled to reach as many as we can for Christ in the days ahead through prayer and mission endeavors that become self supporting and reproducing as quickly as possible.

The following vision and goal are completely consistent with the AFLC World Missions Purpose Statement which declares that we desire, “By the grace of God, to make disciples of all nations through teaching and evangelism.”

Vision

¹*Free and Living Congregations, The Dream That Would Not Die*, 2002 Ambassador Publications, pp. 93, 94

Therefore, by the Word and Spirit, we will seek to equip indigenous leaders to nurture local congregations so that by the grace of God they may direct their own affairs, seek salvation for the lost, and mutually assist one another to the glory of God.

Goals

We will, by God's grace, carry out this vision through the following: prayer, preparation, outreach, training, development and compassion.

- **Prayer**

God's Word reminds us that we are not fighting a physical battle but a spiritual battle. It instructs us to put on the full armor of God and to "pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayer and requests." (Eph. 6:18)

We can not do mission work with out prayer. E.M. Bounds put it this way,

"The key of all missionary success is prayer. That key is in the hands of the home churches. The trophies won by our Lord in heathen lands will be won by praying missionaries, not by professional workers in foreign lands. More especially will this success be won by saintly praying in the churches at home. The home church on her knees fasting and praying, is the great base of spiritual supplies, the sinews of war, and the pledge of victory in this dire and final conflict. Financial resources are not the real sinews of war in this fight. Machinery in itself carries no power to break down heathen walls, open effectual doors and win heathen hearts to Christ. Prayer alone can do the deed. . .

It is all right to urge men to give of their means to the missionary cause. But it is much more important to urge them to give their prayers to the movement. Foreign missions need, today, more the power of prayer than the power of money. Prayer can make even poverty in the missionary cause move on amidst difficulties and hindrances. Much money without prayer is helpless and powerless in the face of the utter darkness and sin and wretchedness on the foreign field. . .

Not a few of us have heard eloquent and earnest speeches stressing the imperative need of money for missions. Where have we heard one stressing the imperative need of prayer? All our plans and devices drive to the one end of raising money, not to quicken faith and promote prayer. The common idea among Church leaders is that if we get the money, prayer will come as a matter of course. The very reverse is the truth. If we get the Church at the business of praying, and thus secure the spirit of missions, money will more than likely come as a matter of course. . . . They who truly pray will be moved to give. Praying creates the giving spirit. The praying ones will give liberally and self-denyingly. He who enters his closet to God, will also open his purse to God. But perfunctory, grudging, assessment-giving kills the very spirit of prayer. Emphasizing the material to the neglect of the spiritual, by an inexorable law retires and discounts the spiritual.²

Prayer is vital. Therefore, we must pray for a revival of prayer for missions. Pastors, would you take up the cause and speak about prayer for missions? People, would you become informed about missions and pray for missions? Our website has up to the minute news and prayer items, and you can sign up for email updates from the missions

²*Essentials of Prayer, Bounds, Edward M. (1835-1913), Public Domain, pp 62,63*

department and individual missionaries by filling out the card in your packet and turning it in to our booth.

- **Preparing missionaries from childhood**
God calls many people to missions at a young age. We need to enlighten them to the possibility of God's call early in life. Ambassador Publications has published a book of short devotional missions stories. These stories were written by people in the AFLC. The World Missions Department is offering one free book to each family here at the conference. We would ask that you read the stories to your children or grandchildren praying that God would soften their hearts to become missionaries or mission supporters according to His will. You can redeem the card in your packet at our booth.
- **Reaching the unreached**
We plan to make a deliberate effort to reach an unreached people group for Christ in the future. The World Missions Committee has already started to pray about this goal. God is already starting to bring potential missionaries to us who have a heart for unreached people groups. Our goal is to determine the first group through prayer and research by December 31, 2008.
- **Training of national pastors and leaders**
Ambassador Institute (Distance Education) headed by Rev. Kevin Olson will hold a vital part of our vision for the future. It is our goal to train spiritual leaders in their own country. These leaders will then be expected to reach their own people and disciple them to be leaders as well. A special emphasis will be made to implant personal faith in these leaders and teach them to be reliant on God rather than dependent on outside funding.
- **Development of self (God) reliant missions works**
Through the observation of Scripture and the reviewing of our church heritage we have come to the conviction that it is both good and right to disciple new believers to be reliant on God rather than dependent upon us.

God commissioned us to work toward spiritual life by making disciples for our Lord (Matt. 28:18-20). This is a two part process. First they have to be brought to spiritual life, then they must be taught to live for the Lord. Living for the Lord requires trusting Him and relying on Him in every situation. We have not been commissioned to make them reliant upon us. Rather God would have them sacrificially live for Him and trust in Him to support their own ministries. Our goal is to have ministries that are self (God) reliant. These ministries will develop their own leadership, support their own churches and be mature enough to engage in mission endeavors of their own, locally and around the world.

We must focus on spiritual life and let the spiritually alive have that same focus. As they focus on spiritual life, they will lead their own congregations under the provision, protection and guidance of the Word and Spirit alone. We must trust that God will lead and provide for them just as He has for us and others down through the years.

Focusing on self-supporting mission endeavors was the conviction of the AFLC Mission Committee from our beginning. The president of the AFLC Mission Committee made the following statement in his annual report to the 1965 Annual Conference.

Much discussion has been carried on in the Mission Committee regarding how to proceed with missionary work. The "indigenous from the start" method seems to be the best. In 1953 the Inter-American and Oriental Mission Society opened a Bible-Seminary with three couples holding Bible Conferences and Evangelistic services and had 15 students within a year. They have faithfully carried on for 10 years with 20 to 30 enrolled with 4 to 6 missionary couples involved. Now they have around 40 churches that are self governing and self supporting, all pastored by graduates of the 3 year Bible Course. Another group has 24 mission couples and a budget of over \$200,000. annually, and yet does not have one national pastor and no church can be called indigenous. In the event of a national crisis it would seem to be only a matter of time until the work would cease to exist without trained leadership.

Our goal for the future is to have self leading, supporting and propagating missions works. This will be the objective for all new works. Existing works will be moved toward this goal by the end of 2010.

- Compassion for the poor
Jesus has called us to remember the needs of the poor. He was concerned that the people of His day followed Him for food rather than spiritual nourishment, yet He fed them when they were hungry (John 6). We are instructed to be mindful of the needs of orphans and widows (James 1:27).

It will be impossible to bring everyone in Third World countries up to our standards. But we are called to prayerfully help those who are destitute. We as an AFLC can and must do a better job at this here at home and in foreign lands. Our greed is the only thing preventing us from this goal.

This is a challenging vision by man's standards. Only by God's help can we reach it. That's what faith in God is all about, doing the things He has called us to do even when they seem impossible. Let us begin by committing ourselves to reach these goals by God's strength.

A more detailed outline of this vision and its goals has been posted on our website. A paper copy can be obtained upon request of the missions office.

Note: At this point the Annual Report begins to discuss items not related to AFLC World Missions Vision and Goals for the future.