

Evangelical Outreach and Congregational Mission All-Staff Gathering
Presiding Bishop Mark S. Hanson
April 28, 2010

Thank you for your leadership and the energy that pulsates from your presence here all week, from your worship and from your conversations. You don't know this but you're leaven for all of us in the building and beyond. I think this is rippling out to all our synod assemblies this spring and that's a powerful thing God is doing through you.

I'm going to tell you this morning what you already know; I think you have all you need to do your work. So if I had my way, you'd probably get on flights this afternoon because you probably don't need more. Let me just tell you some of the things you know and that we know you already have.

You've got a clear mandate for this work. You've got great commissions that flow out of Scripture. I forgot about the Q & A so I was going to run through some of them but just start with Matthew and go right through. You don't need any clearer mandate than the mandate that flows out of God's word to get out there. Get out there, make disciples. Get out there, baptize. Get out there, teach. Get out there, you're anointed with the Spirit. Proclaim Good News to the poor and release to the captives. Get out there, the Spirit is upon you, poured out as the risen Christ said in John. Go out there and meet the risen Christ. Go out there and be my witnesses. Go out there, be ambassadors for Christ. Go out there, be stewards of the ministry and message of reconciliation.

And it's not just the biblical mandate. This church has given you a mandate. We've given ourselves a mandate. It's one of the priorities for this churchwide organization. Join with partners so that every one of our 10,000-plus congregations will be growing centers for evangelical mission.

So you've got a mandate and you've got mission fields. You know that. If there's anyone in this Evangelical Lutheran Church in America who doesn't think God has planted them in a mission field, wherever they are, then we've got to slap them around. [Amen/laughter from audience] (Don't tell the lawyers down the hall I said that.)

One of my concerns with all of our excitement about the 41 fields that we are now going to plant as new ministries in 2010 is that we can convey in that message that the other 10,400 some congregations *aren't* in mission fields. We need to plant the church not only in new sites, but as you know, also continue to re-root the church. As I stood here with our Church Council a few weeks ago, I said the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America is going to be known for planting the church, not uprooting it. And we are going to be known for re-rooting the church in mission contexts, not for tearing the church apart branch-by-branch, leaf-by-leaf.

As much as we focus on these new starts, you've been called to call all of our congregations to that commitment to plant the church. So you've got a mandate and we've got mission fields and you've got a map. EOCM, you, and our colleagues have been praying and dreaming and thinking since the day Steve Bouman walked in here and gathered this group around what a missional map would look like for this church. You've got the GPS of convening mission tables and you're sending it home with all of them. Then, once you've convened people, you don't just give them this little roadmap and say, "Go home and follow this formula." You say, "We're going to start by listening. We're

going to listen to God deep in prayer and we're going to engage God's word as God speaks to us. We're going to listen to the people of our congregations as they discern their spiritual gifts and deepen their spiritual practices and we're going to get out and we're going to do one-to-one listening in our neighborhood."

Let me tell you again: if you don't know the arts of community organizing and doing one-to-one visits, they may be one of the best missional tools you teach at mission tables because people frankly are going to be terrified of going out and listening to their neighbors if you don't give them a way to do it.

It's a simple way to ask a community, "What are your hurts and what are your hopes?" And in those hurts and hopes, begin to hear that voice of the community that hungers for the Gospel and longs to be at the Bread of Life's table.

You've got a map and we know how to follow it. You've got mission developers and you've got re-developers. We need more and we're going to identify them and you're going to convince pastors that they're mission developers and re-developers wherever they are and we're going to provide mentors for them. We've got MIF working with our seminaries to make sure our first-year graduates come out ready to be mission developers in whatever their call. And you've got mission partners.

I know sometimes you think we've put the whole weight of the future of the ELCA on the backs of the directors for evangelical mission. Can I get an Amen to that? [Amen] I've said often about you and to you: we've bet the farm on you. That's really not accurate. We bet the farm on the Holy Spirit and we bet the farm that the Holy Spirit has planted this idea in us and called you forth to be instruments of what the Holy Spirit is going to do. So the increase of the possibility of return on our bet substantially increases. I love you all dearly but I did decide to put my money on the Holy Spirit this morning and not on the directors for evangelical mission. [Applause]

But don't think you're out there on your own. The EOCM leadership team is divided so that they connect with you. You've got a missionary bishop. The moment you get up in the morning and think, "I'm doing this work for the synod rather than with the synod or I'm doing this work on behalf of the missionary bishop rather than alongside of the missionary bishop," you have to sit down and have a talk with that missionary bishop and that synod council. Don't let this get put upon you. This is shared work. This is mission in its fullest sense, a participatory part of this whole ecology of the ELCA. If MIF folks aren't out there helping you, get alongside of them and imagine how you gather up funds to invest so that we have resources to plant and support new ministries. If the Foundation staff isn't catching a vision of what you're doing so that they can get those faithful Lutherans to plan a gift that sustains this church for more than the two to three to ten years we're doing this, get alongside of them. Get alongside of those church building consultants. Get alongside of all of the EOCM staff, but not only EOCM but also Multicultural Ministries and Church in Society and Vocation and Education and Global Mission. We're all at tables with you so draw upon us.

You've got a brand mark. These days, I often use that middle section in Mark 8 where Jesus stops his disciples and asks, "Who do you say that I am?" That core question of Jesus' identity is one the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America is asking, particularly since the Churchwide Assembly. Who are we? And we're settling into the answer to that. Some want to define us on the basis of human sexuality. I don't understand the Gospel or the Lutheran Confessions to say sexual orientation defines a church. We are a church

defined by our baptism into the crucified and risen Christ. We now live in Christ and Christ in us. We bear Christ's name in the body that bears the marks of his crucifixion but then carries the Good News of his resurrection to the world. That is the body of Christ, the living church. And we are part of that community of faith. That's our identity.

Mark goes on to say that Jesus didn't want just to be clear that folks knew his identity. He wanted them to know the mission to which God had called him, placing him in this incarnational moment in history. And he said, "We're going to Jerusalem and there I'm going to suffer and die." Our mission is inseparable from our participation in Jesus' suffering, suffering for the life of the world and Christ's resurrection.

So this is a time when we are asking about our identity and about our mission. Then Jesus says, "You know what? It's going to cost you something. It's going to cost you your life to lay down your life, pick up your cross, and follow me for the sake of the Gospel." I think people in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America are having some deep conversations about what it's going to cost in their discipleship to bear the cross for the life of the world so that they might proclaim the risen Christ to all they meet and meet Christ in them.

And so, that little brand mark of ours preaches. If you need a visual image when you convene that mission table, pull out that emblem of the world and the cross and say, "What does this mean for you and your identity in mission?" It preaches. And if you need a little prompt, say the mission statement, "Marked with the cross of Christ forever, we are claimed, gathered, and sent for the sake of the world." It's all in that brand mark. Then put our name up there: we are evangelicals. That preaches and disturbs.

So we've got the name and then the tagline, God's Work, Our Hands. So we've got a mandate. We've got mission fields. We've got mission developers. We've got a brand mark. We've got mission stories and mission interpreters. We've got methodologies. And now we're on the verge of giving you two more "M"s in this bag of M&Ms that you already have: we've got mission schools. You shared some about that vision. I mean on April 16, there was a lot of energy when EOCM folks and Vocation and Education folks and SELECT folks and seminaries said, "OK. We've got the makings here of a church committed to the formation of missional leaders. We've got synods with lay schools of theology. We've got a SELECT program. We've got seminaries committed to lifelong education. What if we took all those elements, stirred them up with the presence of the Holy Spirit and re-formed them into mission schools? What if we had a thousand evangelists let loose in this church? What if we had catechists and those youth and family workers that have a certificate and diaconal workers and some of them in that process discerning a call to Word and sacrament ministry but most just unleashed with their passion for the Gospel." I think mission schools would bring new life to our work.

One more "M" in this bag of M&Ms you're carrying home: we're about ready to launch the Macedonia Project. You probably haven't heard about it but you're going to hear about it right now from the presiding bishop. In 2 Corinthians 8, there is the story of Macedonians giving thanks first to the Lord, then giving to others locally, then giving beyond their needs. This is what we imagine we're going to put some money into. Hear me now: we keep reducing, reducing, reducing budgets. We keep laying off staff. Now there comes a time when we've got to put some money into some things even when we're taking it out of other things. We're saying that we're going to put some money into the Macedonia Project, trying to identify at least 12 synods. These 12 synods are places

where there is capacity for congregations to grow in their mission support of the synod and of the churchwide organization and where there is some passion in the bishop for stewardship. We're not looking for what level they're giving now. We're looking at the capacity for a congregation to grow in stewardship practices and to want to go deeper into scriptures about what it means to be stewards of God's manifold gifts, and how can we stretch our giving so that we give generously beyond the congregation like those Macedonians: to and through the synod and to and through the mission of the churchwide organization. We want that Macedonia Project to convene those mission tables so that they teach the arts of one-on-one relational conversations that are about money because that's the last "M" we've got. We've got money. It's just that it tends to be in the wrong pockets and in the wrong places. You know we've got tons of money in this church invested in savings accounts and CDs and cemetery funds and Mission Investment Funds and local bank savings accounts. And we've got wealthy people in this church, but a too small a percentage have a planned gift to the church involved. We've got plenty of money in this church. I've said often that I think we spent 30 years talking about sex to avoid talking about the money we have. I'm absolutely convinced of that. [Applause]

So we see the Macedonia Project as an investment of the money the church entrusts to us back in this church. So we've got it all, don't we? So what's the problem? We've got it all. We've got a biblical mandate. We've got mission fields. We've got the EOCM map. We've got mission stories. We've got the Macedonia Project. We've got mission schools. We've got directors for evangelical missions. We've got missionary bishops. We've got money. How can we possibly fail? Well, absent a vision from God, I hate to tell you but I think that bag of M&Ms, when it comes to mission support, is still going to leave us fighting over the crumbs that fall from the table. And maybe we've talked too much in these recent weeks and months about the bag of M&Ms we're carrying and not enough about seeing, hearing, and living the vision that God gives us for this time. So what vision, not what mandate out of Scripture, but what visions have you had recently from God that are going to shape your life and your ministry? A vision from God where God showed you, God spoke to you, a compelling vision that will transform your reality, your ministry in the context in which you serve, a vision for you to live. Take three minutes and share your most recent vision with somebody next to you. [Sharing]

Thank you. If we have time later, we will hear some of your visions. I'm going to suggest that the lessons for this coming Sunday are about as compelling a vision and series of visions as we need for this time. I'm only going to read one, from Acts 11: "Now the apostles and believers who were in Judea heard that the Gentiles had also accepted the word of God. So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him, saying, 'Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?'"

Then Peter began to explain it to them, step by step. He followed the GPS from EOCM, saying just like Steve Bouman told me to, "I was in the city of Joppa praying, and in a trance I saw a vision. There was something like a large sheet coming down from heaven, being lowered by its four corners; and it came close to me." How many of you shared that kind of vision? No visions of dirty laundry? God uses mysterious visions to shake us up here, "As I looked at it closely I saw four-footed animals, beasts of prey, reptiles, and birds of the air. I also heard a voice saying to me, 'Get up, Peter; kill and eat.' But I replied, 'By no means, Lord; for nothing profane or unclean has ever entered my mouth.' But a second time the voice answered from heaven, 'What God has made

clean, you must not call profane.’ This happened three times.” Just in case you don’t get the vision the first time, go back to sleep. It may still come. “[T]hen everything was pulled up again to heaven. At that very moment three men, sent to me from Caesarea, arrived at the house where we were. The Spirit told me to go with them and not to make a distinction between them and us. These six brothers also accompanied me, and we entered the man’s house. He told us how he had seen the angel standing in his house and saying, ‘Send to Joppa and bring Simon, who is called Peter; he will give you a message by which you and your entire household will be saved. And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as it had upon us at the beginning. And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said, ‘John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.’ If then God gave them the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God? When they heard this, they were silenced. And they praised God, saying, ‘Then God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life.’” (NRSV Acts 11:1-18) Do you need a more compelling vision for what we’re about than that?

I’m sorry, but because of that vision that God still gives to us, there would probably be more work for synod bishops and staff to mediate more congregational conflicts just like Peter seemed to stir up work and e-mails and bloggers. Can you imagine how those e-mails were flying? How those bloggers were having a heyday? And how many synods were getting a call saying, “You’d better come out here because we’re just divided here in this congregation because we heard that Peter is eating with uncircumcised men.” Peter had the audacity to suggest that the embrace of God’s mercy in Christ might include those very people that we deemed unclean to fulfill the Law. He said, “What God has made clean you must not call profane.” I’m afraid we’re spending too much time with self-proclaimed cleaner-uppers in the church and not enough time with visionaries. There are just too many self-proclaimed cleaner-uppers that want to tidy up mission and make it all neat and tidy and defined according to their definition of who is clean and who is unclean, who is acceptable and who is not acceptable. And yet the vision is, when the Spirit descends upon those whom the Spirit will, it’s going to create a mess, and God is in the cleaning-up business. That’s who Jesus was: cleaning up the wounds of the leper with his healing touch when others had deemed those lepers untouchable, cleaning up those who had been shamed and shunned and silenced by their gender or by their age or by their tax-collecting status. And saying, “Such as these I will welcome into the kingdom,” and extend God’s word of forgiveness.

I wonder. Maybe our work isn’t done until every member of every congregation in this church is struggling with the question, “Who was I to hinder God?” We talk a lot in community organizing about putting some tension in the room. Well, I’d suggest that question puts some tension in the room. That’s a missional question that I’m going to be pushed and pulled and prodded by you and others to ask, “How is my preoccupation with our congregation being a friendly place, how is my preoccupation with the survival of this denomination, how is my obsession with my continued place of power and privilege as a white, male leader in this church, how have all of those consuming concerns of my life hindered God and what God is doing?”

I think there’s a lot of good will in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America to grow evangelical missional congregations. I think there’s a lot of resistance to doing the introspective work on how we hinder what God is trying to do by who we are and how

we live and how we speak. And until we've asked the, "Who was I to hinder God?" question, maybe we haven't gotten to the depth of the missional conversation because the Holy Spirit's going to have its way with us. It may take a few visions to convince us of that fact, but it's there.

The second vision for this Sunday is from Revelation 21. I think we haven't talked enough about visions are visual, aural, and missional. They are God's way of getting our attention to see what God is trying to do, but there's always speaking in the visions: they're aural, God is speaking to us. And they're about how we live that vision. They're not just there for our possession. They are for our living. They're missional. And can there be a more missional vision than Revelation 21, "Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more." (*NRSV* Revelation 21:1) Sometimes I think we don't spend enough time on the vision of the sea no more. It's tempting to move towards the ecological crisis we're in and take that as a kind of prediction: that, given our consumptive living, there won't be any seas. That's not very faithful to the image of sea in the scriptures, a symbol of chaos. The sea was the place from which Leviathan came. Evil came out of the sea. The sea was what separated people from each other and from God. It was the abyss into which one fell in a life of meaninglessness and absence of faith. Are any of those descriptors of our life today? We are separated by our individuality and our self-preoccupation with our needs. Kenn Inskip will tell you that one of the reasons we're getting edged out of the market as Lutherans is that we haven't convinced the consumer that there is a transaction in a Lutheran church that is going to satisfy their need for a return on their investment of time and money in this religious consumer marketplace. That's the world we live in: a transactional world of consumerism, in a competitive religious culture.

And yet, you can't tell me we don't have something to offer in that world. Because it's the world we live in and it's a world where the sea exists because chaos exists and people live separate lives and evil lurks, we have a vision of God coming down in Christ, not us trying to achieve our way to God.

Tell me about how counter-cultural this is. When we had the last EOCM tables in two weeks ago, we had a great moment because I forgot my Bible and I asked, "Does anyone have a Bible?" Some of you were in the room [Answers of "Yes"]. An African-American woman stood up and gave me her floppy King James Bible and I was reading from the Bible and she was standing next to me and we were preaching and there was a picture taken of this. I decided I was going to send it to a certain man that I had been with at the White House at breakfast with President Obama two days before, a man I couldn't get myself to embrace like everybody else who was falling all over him and wanting their picture: Joel Osteen. [Oooh from the audience] I decided to send this picture to Joel Osteen to show that we preach this Gospel in this church too, and it's not a prosperity Gospel. [Aaaaah from the audience] And that prosperity Gospel may be filling your domes and it may be giving you TV ratings that shoot out of the sky, but you're seduced into an American consumer religious marketplace with a false Gospel. And we need to proclaim a vision of a Gospel that isn't about us ascending a ladder of prosperity and achieving our way to God by giving our life to Jesus and fulfilling Jesus' law, but we're going to proclaim a Gospel of God coming to Earth, an incarnational Gospel, a Gospel of a crucified and risen Christ who reconciles us to God and to one another and entrusts that message to us.

This vision was written to people who were being persecuted for the faith. We were in Rome in January and we went into the catacombs as I've done each time I'm there, among those tombs of those early martyrs to whom this vision was sent through John to sustain their faith, to give them a vision that that Roman Empire called Babylon—the harlot in Revelation—ultimately will not prevail because God is coming down to wipe away the tears from your eyes. The death that Rome is imposing upon you will not be your final death because God in Christ has raised you to new life. We went down in those catacombs and had to just stand there and say, “These folks died clinging to that promise.” And then we brought bread and wine with us and found a little altar in a family grave and we had to break open the bread and break open the wine so that we could be joined to that communion of saints and strengthened in our witness as the Spirit's vision had strengthened them.

Tell me there aren't people with whom you live and serve who need to see and hear and live this vision of God coming down in Christ and a new heaven and a new earth wiping away our tears. Joe Bash, the first pastor with whom I worked, said, “Every morning get up and do your eschatological calisthenics.” Maybe we've become more preoccupied with the tone of our body than the tone of our lived faith. And Joe Bash says, “You go out everyday and you live this vision as you wipe away the tears of your neighbor, as you go to those who are being persecuted and you say, ‘I have a vision for you of a new heaven and a new earth, the empire shall not quench your life.’ Do your eschatological calisthenics when you proclaim Good News to the poor and release to the captives.”

On Sunday there's yet another vision that transforms another reality. In Acts, it's the reality of our defining limits around God's way and God's realm. In Revelation, it's the reality of chaos and evil. In John 13, it's the reality of loss. Jesus' disciples are coming to terms with Jesus' saying goodbye. This one in whom we have invested our lives, our hopes, and our futures is saying he's going.

Let me tell you, there's a lot of dwelling on loss in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America today. Not just loss of a way of being church, but losses in community life, losses of congregational membership and resources. Loss is a prescription for self-absorption and self-preoccupation. And Jesus, in that farewell conversation, gives them a different reality to live: “Love one another as I have loved you.” Get out of your self-preoccupation. Live in my love given to you and for you, which frees you to love one another.

So I was supposed to talk about mission support and I was supposed to convince you that you have a responsibility to challenge people on their level of giving and to grow mission support. But I'm going to defer all of that to Craig Settlege. I am absolutely convinced, absent such compelling visions from God, we will keep viewing mission support as crumbs that have fallen from the table over which we will continue to compete with good intended partners in ministry—be they seminaries, outdoor ministries, the local food shelf, the global companion synod, or the synod or churchwide. Frankly, the devil would like nothing more than to see us consuming our energies competing over crumbs rather than living a vision of God's promised future revealed in Jesus as Christ. [Amen from the audience] I'm here to say mission support will flow when the Holy Spirit's power descends upon us and we live courageously, stupefyingly, and faithfully the vision God has given you and me. May it be so. Thank you. [Big Amen and applause]