

Missiologist Reflection
ELCA Strategic Direction: Congregations

Craig L. Nesson
Wartburg Theological Seminary
September 12/13, 2003

“Support congregations in their call to be faithful, welcoming, and generous, sharing the mind of Christ.”

Without offering detailed commentary on the “Theological and Biblical Foundations for Planning for Mission,” I find the affirmations in this foundational document to be in principle very sound and well-grounded biblically. The explicit Scripture references are very helpful in a statement of this kind and for this purpose.

I strongly affirm the location of the strategic direction pertaining to congregations as the *first* listed. This underscores the ELCA constitutional definition of the “nature of the church” with its clear commitment to congregations as a primary expression:

The Church exists both as an inclusive fellowship and as local congregations gathered for worship and Christian service. Congregations find their fulfillment in the universal community of the Church, and the universal Church exists in and through congregations. This church, therefore, derives its character and powers both from the sanction and representation of its congregations and from its inherent nature as an expression of the broader fellowship of the faithful. In length, it acknowledges itself to be in the historic continuity of the communion of saints; in breadth, it expresses the fellowship of believers and congregations in our day. (“Nature of the Church” 3.02.).

In my book, *Beyond Maintenance to Mission: A Theology of the Congregation* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999), I have argued for an interpretation of congregational life as revolving around two foci: those practices that constitute the *identity* and those that mediate the *mission* of the congregation. The practices that especially foster identity are worship, education, fellowship, and stewardship. Those that especially mediate mission are evangelism, ecumenism, global connectedness, and social ministry. The most important practice in which congregations engage, for both the formation of identity and the sending into mission, is worship. For the purposes of this commentary I would furthermore argue that we consider these eight characteristics of congregations as the distinguishing “marks of the church” on the local level.

The four practices that express congregational mission (evangelism, ecumenism, global connectedness, and social ministry) are more fully elaborated in the proposed second, third, and fourth strategic directions. The four practices that articulate congregational identity, however, are compressed into the first strategic direction. While I find the proposed wording felicitous in expression, it lacks sufficient theological specificity in my judgment. The descriptors “faithful, welcoming, and generous” are each quite generic and require more explicit theological substance, even at the risk of greater complexity.

“Faithful”: Faithful to what? To the Gospel of Jesus Christ! How? Through worship (gathering around Word and Sacrament) and disciple-making (which I take to be the top

priority in our time for the educational agenda of congregations). **At the minimum, I think it is imperative that there be an explicit reference to worship in this strategic direction.**

“Welcoming”: Yes, but to whom? Every congregation takes itself to be “friendly” to insiders. The central issue involves the welcome of outsiders. Therefore I prefer the word “hospitable” which entails the welcoming of the stranger in the name of the Crucified One.

“Generous”: Again this is a helpful but generic term, lacking theological substance. Generous why? Generous to whom? We desperately need to reclaim a biblically-based notion of Christian stewardship.

“Sharing the mind of Christ”: While I like this Pauline image, there is a danger of a gnostic interpretation of the church’s mission when this image is used in isolation from the many other images used in the New Testament to describe the church. Far preferable would be the use of another, stronger Pauline image, the body of Christ. “Body of Christ” is organic, corporal, and encompasses the notion of Christ as the “head” and “mind.” The church as “body of Christ” incarnates Christ in the form of community (cf. Bonhoeffer: “Christ existing as community”).

At the risk of offering a much “clunkier” (though more theologically substantive) wording, I suggest the following:

Support congregations in their call to be faithful to the Gospel of Jesus Christ through worship and disciple-making, foster hospitable community, and respond generously to God’s grace in stewardship, empowering members to be the body of Christ in the world.