

MISSIOLOGIST REFLECTION: ELCA STRATEGIC DIRECTION  
“DEEPEN AND EXTEND OUR GLOBAL, ECUMENICAL AND INTERFAITH  
RELATIONSHIPS FOR THE SAKE OF GOD’S MISSION”

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The rationale for the ELCA Strategic Direction number four is succinctly spelled out in “Theological and Biblical Foundations for Planning for Mission.” It states, “God’s mission is carried out through a priesthood of all believers (1 Pet. 2:5) as God inspires, empowers, and blesses the work of the church in its many manifestations, both organizationally and individually. Such mission is ultimately global in vision and impact, for Jesus calls us the salt of the earth and the light of the world (Matt.5:13-14). We further acknowledge that our mission constitutes but one part of God’s saving activity in the world. We affirm the work of God wherever it is found, trust that God is active in and through other churches and, indeed, in and through everyone and everything that God has made.”

The above statement is a clear acknowledgment that global, ecumenical and interfaith are mutually related realities that the church is called to reckon with. They cannot be addressed in isolation. A few basic facts will bear this out. First, Christians today comprise approximately one third of the world’s population, and the rest belong to other faiths or have no faith. Second, within the Christian demographics, the majority of Christians today live in the southern hemisphere, and the church there is expected to grow phenomenally within the next two decades. As a result, Christianity today is in significant measure a “non-Western” religion. Third, the growth of Christianity in the global south has occurred, by and large, outside the traditional Christian denominations, i.e., among Pentecostals, non-denominational or independent churches. Fourth, inter-religious conflicts today are no longer local but increasingly global in nature. We are no longer unaffected by events and developments occurring elsewhere around the globe.

An awareness of these facts would suggest considerable humility on our part is appropriate and necessary as we engage in strategic planning for our church. We are not in control of the realities of our world and we often act or react to developments that we seldom fully comprehend. Put differently, our understanding of God’s mission will always remain partial and parochial. And yet, we dare to dream and envision a future that seeks to fulfill God’s vision for the created order. “Relationships” then is the key category for global, ecumenical and interfaith commitments. How we build, “deepen and extend” relationships are crucial for our future, the church’s future and the world’s future. What follows are some tentative reflections on the implications for our proposed global, ecumenical and interfaith commitments.

1. Our awareness that we are part of a global church implies that we act and respond to our realities and challenges in consultation with other Christians and that our actions and resolutions *do not undermine or discredit the credibility of Christian witness in other contexts and cultures*. We must be cautious in making unilateral decisions in our assemblies that have implications for the life and witness of the church in other parts of the globe.
2. Our theological self-understanding as Lutherans must remain open to the hermeneutical realities of churches in other cultures and context. In other words, we need to be aware that our theological heritage originated in a culturally circumscribed context and that some of our cherished theological categories and assumptions are in constant need of *re-vision and re-conceptualization*, lest we run the risk of making our theology into an ideology of a particular race or culture!

3. Despite the Lutheran acknowledgment of the importance of God's creation, we seem to have an underdeveloped theology of creation. A proper theology of creation in relation to God's mission would certainly strengthen our global, ecumenical and interfaith commitments. A recovery of the biblical concept of "oikumene" as referring to the whole inhabited earth and not simply the Christian part of it is necessary.
4. We need to acknowledge the growth of churches that have emerged outside the traditional denominational churches, non-creedal churches and immigrant churches in our midst and recognize that our patterns of ministry, liturgical practices and catechetical methods might be enriched by those churches.
5. We need to considerably expand our ecumenical horizons by initiating dialogues and bilateral relationships with churches that have been outside the pale of Protestant ecumenism.
6. We need to reexamine the usefulness of "textual ecumenism," i.e. finely nuanced theological agreements that rehearse historical doctrinal differences produced by some North-Atlantic scholars, divorced from the existential realities and challenges of the church today. Similarly, the concept of "reception" of ecumenical agreements appears to be anachronistic in a post-modern world of diversity and pluralism. We therefore need to critically examine the goals of our ecumenical engagement and seek new ways of arriving at ecumenical consensus.
7. Christian unity emerged as an important mark of the Church in relation to the challenge of mission in the modern ecumenical movement. Unfortunately, during the course of the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the focus on mission disappeared in ecumenical, bilateral and multilateral discussions. As a result, *intra*-Christian relations have been pursued without reference to *extra*-Christian relations. A recovery of the dimension of mission must become a priority in ecumenical discussions.
8. Our ecumenical engagements could be significantly furthered in cooperative efforts in dialogue with and ministry among people of other faiths. For historical reasons, Lutherans have a tendency to think of interfaith relations primarily in relation to Jews and not other faiths! We need to reexamine our interfaith priorities in light of contemporary realities!
9. Furthermore, we need to see interfaith relationships as a legitimate form of Christian engagement and witness and not as a covert form of *preparatio evangelica*. We need to be cautious that we *not* interpret the Strategic Direction number four as subservient to number two: "to grow in evangelical outreach."
10. A global, ecumenical and interfaith emphasis warrants development of appropriate educational materials to help pastors and congregations understand the importance of relationships in community and the dangers of stereotypical views of the other.