

Missiologist Reflection
ELCA Strategic Direction
Evangelical Outreach

Introduction:

It is exciting to see the ELCA become strategic in its thinking, planning and action. The five strategic directions of the churchwide organization should provide a means for the ELCA to define its identity in mission in new ways. I am particularly pleased, and relieved, that "evangelical outreach" plays such a prominent role within this plan. Now comes the critical question, What do Lutherans mean by "evangelical outreach"? Let me suggest that to answer this question is not as easy as it may seem. Two points are critical: 1. How will a church that embraces an evangelical identity (ELCA) discuss, think, plan and act on its existence as an evangelical church and, 2. How can the plan move forward without getting caught up too excessively on definitions?

The five sections below will hopefully create some materials that can guide our discussion about this strategic direction.

1. What is the Nature of the “Evangelical Outreach”

What does "evangelism" or "evangelical outreach" mean in this strategic plan? A brief survey of theologians, church leaders and evangelistic literature would show us quite clearly that the word is used with a wide variety of meanings -especially within the Lutheran Church. It is necessary, therefore, to specify what we mean -and don't mean -by evangelism or evangelical outreach within the strategic plan AS MUCH AS POSSIBLE.

The biggest split in defining evangelism might be referred to as "classical" and "traditional."

The "**Classical Definition**" goes back to the Reformation. To evangelize means to preach, bring, tell, proclaim, announce or declare the gospel. Classical "evangelism" was truly proclamation and directed toward the "insider."

The "**Traditional Definition**" dates back to the 19th century. To evangelize means to proclaim the gospel to the "outsider" i.e. lost, the unsaved, the unchurched, the non-Christian, the marginal Christian, etc. with the intent of conversion (back) to the Christian faith and/or baptism.

Lutherans use both definitions. But are we clear at what point either definition is appropriate or useful? For example, should the office of ministry be primarily characterized as an evangelistic office (Classical Definition) or does the gift of evangelism (I Cor.) primarily refer to evangelical outreach *outside* the church (Traditional Definition)? Example # 2: Which sacrament has more character as "evangelistic outreach" in our North American context: baptism or the Eucharist? The very statement of this question points to "the Lutheran problem."

In any case, Lutherans will want to define evangelism in terms that include INREACH and OUTREACH and that include Word, Baptism and Eucharist. Evangelism cannot be limited to outreach targeted to "outsiders". This special appropriation of evangelism may be a unique Lutheran contribution to the praxis of evangelism in North America. If it is truly evangelical, it reaches beyond "evangelical outreach" to "evangelical inreach" and includes all of the means of grace. Thus Lutheran worship will set the tone for defining "evangelism" -- either appropriately or inappropriately. Here is a place where the strategic plan may need to move beyond Evangelical and Roman Catholic definitions of "evangelical outreach."

2. The Church

1. A problem: There are theological, practical, structural and, most importantly, cultural forces that have worked against any and all ELCA "evangelism initiatives" in the past. What is different this time? Are we now smarter or more focused? Are we ready to name and tackle this web of difficulties as part of this strategy in a new way? Have we learned from the past? (example: outreach to communities of color.)

2. A problem: Do we accept that Lutherans primarily have defined their identity historically in a Christendom context and that North America today is primarily a Post-Christendom culture? How will this shift change the language and approach of this strategy?
3. A problem: Clericalism kills evangelical outreach, especially a clericalism that doesn't understand "evangelical outreach." Lutheran congregations suffer from a heavy dose of clericalism. Can this strategy address Lutheran clericalism in any meaningful way?
4. A problem: Lutherans speak about and practice "Word and Sacrament" in terms that limit the evangelistic thrust of the gospel both inside and outside the church. In what sense might the strategic plan be undermined by a misreading of "Lutheran theology?"
5. A problem: How will a church that is primarily white and middle class speak good news to those communities in North America that are different? Will this strategy be in essence too white and middle class?

3. The World

How helpful is the section "Theological and Biblical Foundations for Planning for Mission" for mapping the theological and contextual landscape for "evangelical outreach." Many sentences are very instructive. But does this page really set the direction and tone needed to move forward. Where would you say "yes" and where would you say "no."

Three sets of additional questions might assist us in addressing the theological and biblical foundations for mission:

Set # 1 God's mission and salvation (sentences 1 + 2): What is the message here?

What is God doing in the world. *The Missio Dei*

What is God doing in the world through Christ. *The Kingdom of God*

How are these two missions related? Are they confused? Are they clear?

Set # 2 What is the church's relationship with the world?

Is the church's call really to "to be flexible in methods of communicating an unchanging message within a changing world?" (CMI)

Should Lutherans reframe the gospel and culture question as a question of Spirit and Christian freedom?

Do traditional Lutheran categories (e.g. church & state) assist in framing the relationship between church and world in ways that are missiologically relevant for the strategic initiative?

Set #3 If the theological section does not address BIG issues like God's wrath and hell, the last judgment, religions pluralism, election, the poor and why is Jesus necessary for forgiveness, it will leave most Lutherans powerless to move forward with "evangelical outreach." Would you agree?

4. Integration: Can Lutherans be fully biblical, fully ecumenical and fully evangelical in defining evangelical outreach? That is certainly our goal. In the absence of our own definitions and methods of evangelism, however, Lutherans have usually imported evangelism theologies and practices. This has led to some local successes but, in general, it has taken us as a church down a dead end street. Evangelism praxis in the ELCA struggles with how to integrate theory and practice, theology and method -- being fully ecumenical and fully Lutheran. How will the strategic plan address these issues of integration?

5. "Assist members, congregations, synods, and institutions and agencies." Yes, but how? One of the most thrilling dimensions of strategic direction #2 is that it wants the "whole church" to enter into evangelical outreach -- not just "members and congregations." This list includes colleges, publishing houses, hospitals, social service agencies, all of the church's arms of ministry -- even seminaries. Is this what is really meant? What are the implications of this goal? How does the church go about trying to achieve this massive goal where it allows energy to emerge from the base and not the head?