

Reflections on an ELCA Mission Statement

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The mission (purpose) of the church of Jesus Christ does not change over time, even though we may need new words to express it in new times. If we take our cues from the New Testament, the ELCA's mission statement should speak of proclaiming the gospel of salvation through Jesus Christ so that people may believe and be baptized and then, as members of the body of Christ, serve him through proclamation/witness/teaching and doing works of love and mercy. The six points of the "Constitutional Catechism" (summarized by Lowell Almen, from provision 4.02) state this perennial statement of mission very well, I believe.

When the three "statements for consideration" on mission from the ELCA Church Council are put alongside either the Constitutional Catechism or my little summary, they look rather partial and uninfluenced by the perennial views of the church's mission. Words such as "gospel", "proclamation", "witness", "faith", and "salvation" are never mentioned, while trendy terms such as "celebrating diversity", "advocating for justice and peace", and "embodying his [Christ's] example" are given prominence. I'm for justice and peace and diversity, and I believe that they need to be part of the church's life, but I do not think they get at the unique and essential mission of the church. Furthermore, when collected together they have many recent and controversial connotations that make them more difficult as consensus words of the sort needed for a mission statement that will evoke wide support from ELCA members. Some of these terms and concepts fit more appropriately in a "vision statement."

Is the ELCA a "church"?

One of the reasons that trying to formulate mission and vision statements for the ELCA is difficult is that the ELCA consists of many things and it is hard for one statement to fit all of them. As an institutional entity in history, incorporated under legal statutes, the ELCA is not a church or the church in the theological sense. That is true if all of the entities that are part of the ELCA are included and it is true if we only speak of the churchwide organization, or of the synods, or of all ELCA congregations. Strictly speaking, in biblical and confessional terms, "church" refers either to an assembly of believers among whom the gospel is proclaimed and the sacraments are administered (or some similar sentence from the N.T.) or to the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church that includes all believers or (alternatively) to the whole Christian church on earth. Not one of these statements describes the ELCA.

The ELCA constitutional language of "three expressions" of the church, while perhaps helpful in terms of defining the organization's structure and roles, leads us astray if we use them to try to think of the "church" in its theological sense. It is obvious that even the totality of the ELCA is not the whole Christian church on earth; it may be less obvious that the churchwide organization and the synods are not "church" either. Each member congregation in itself or each assembly of believers gathered around the means of grace properly is called "church" (and this is the case

altogether apart from polity-it need not refer to any sort of congregationalism), but even all such ELCA congregations together do not constitute "the church" in any larger sense, theologically speaking.

What is at stake in all of this? We need to think of the ELCA institution (whatever aspect of it is intended) not as "the church" or even "a church" but as a support organization, or a mission and service arm, or a regional support system, or a resource and cooperation network that serves the mission of the gospel of Jesus Christ as that is carried on in, by, and through the local assemblies of believers. I'm not suggesting that we revise the constitution or rename the entities, but that we think theologically in and from the congregations as the focus of ELCA mission, vision, and strategy.

What would starting in and from congregations mean? It would prevent several things that have been distracting and harming the ELCA since its beginning: for example, divisive studies that were not being called for by the vast majority of congregations (the sexuality study of the early 1990s); task forces driven by a few voices trying to make unnecessary, unwarranted, and unwanted changes (the ministry task force); ecumenical policy statements designed to make the ELCA conduct its work with other Christian groups along the lines of international diplomacy between governments rather than by and for worshiping congregations (which policy ends up having little impact since, as with politics, most if not all ecumenism is local); ecumenical proposals that do not unite but divide the ELCA, formulated by a few voices trying to impose their views through full communion efforts (the Concordat, CCM); the decision by the churchwide assembly (hardly a representative group, as we are reminded again and again) to force a vote by a certain date on one of the most controversial and divisive moral issues of our time (homosexuality). Why would these have been prevented? Because all of them were designed from the top down and in most cases they were/are also controlled from the top down. They have led to the lack of interest and lack of loyalty revealed in so many ELCA congregations.

What things might be different if the ELCA took its signals from the congregations? The churchwide and synodical efforts would be aimed at those things about which there is wide congregational consensus and that are theologically well grounded so that they encourage widespread commitment: for example, supporting the worldwide mission of Christianity; working to alleviate world hunger; advocating for, equipping for, and supporting congregational and cooperative ministries for and with children, the elderly, the marginalized, the sick, the homeless, and the hungry; helping to start and support new congregations and new ministries in cooperation with local congregations (ELCA and others); helping to revitalize congregations that need to refocus on mission; supporting new forms of ministry needed to address new challenges and opportunities.

The support structures (churchwide and synods) should inspire and encourage congregations in these efforts, not regulate or frustrate or seek to co-opt them. Not everything has to be one-size-fits-all, even if some things work better that way. We should not imagine that the congregation is the end user of the products of the larger church's initiatives and actions but that the congregation is the central actor in Christ's mission and the central actor for the church's theological reflection, for it is the primal community within which knowledge of God through Christian practices is

gained. This is not to say that congregations are perfect or that they are adequate to all of the ELCA's theological and mission tasks. It is to say that they ought to be the focus and starting point for the ELCA's mission, vision, and strategy. (See the literature on congregations by Wind & Lewis, Kelsey, and Ammermann; and on ecclesiology by Newbigin, Zizioulas, Volf, and Keifert.)

Vision: the direction of the ELCA

If our vision follows from something like the six points of the "Constitutional Catechism", with its clear emphases on proclamation and service, then our direction should be toward those who need to hear and believe and those who need our service. The shift in most parts of the church in the U.S. from being Christendom to being a mission field, together with the wave of new immigrants from Mexico, Central and South America, Africa, the Middle East, and Asia, seem to me to be a gigantic sign from God telling the ELCA and other church bodies that proclaiming salvation through Jesus Christ to all people, reaching out in love across linguistic, racial, and cultural boundaries, and sharing our blessings directly even as we also work through government and other agencies for the wellbeing of all residents in the U.S. is the direction our mission must take us. This will not necessarily build up the ELCA as an organization or in terms of membership, but it will transform us in accord with God's preferred future for us.

This focus of vision on the U.S. is not intended to limit our vision, since we must remain committed to Christ's mission to the whole world, but if we are not serious about mission in our own context it is doubtful that global mission will get our attention. On the other hand, perhaps it will be the case that our previous and present commitments to the mission beyond our national borders will help us see the significant challenges here at home more clearly. Rather than using slogans regarding contemporary movements or the priorities of special interest groups for the ELCA's statement of vision, I think it is better to speak in terms of specific needs and actions—using biblical and traditional language where possible, so that the importance of the vision is obvious to all congregations. In that regard, I found myself uninspired by the statements on "values," not so much because of what they included but by what was left out. I think we should omit having any section on values, because it will get so long that it will be meaningless.

Strategic directions for the ELCA

"Strategic directions" are the priorities and chief outcomes to which the ELCA aspires. Much of what I have already written deals with priorities. Outcomes will be a different matter, because they need to be specific and attainable; this the only way we will know if we achieve them. And it is the only way that we will be able to figure out whether and, if so, how we can attain them. Here is where I think the imaginations of congregations could be our most important resource. For example, if the need for more pastors and other rostered ministers is seen to be a priority, every congregation (or group of congregations) might decide to commit itself to raise up and support through seminary one candidate per so many members. If new congregations are needed in certain areas, such decisions should be made not primarily by national staff and synods but with active involvement and support of area congregations from the beginning; my sense is that too often the congregations are invited in after decisions have already been made. Congregations might decide to send their students to and support ELCA colleges that emphasize undergraduate

education in more strategic terms of what God needs people to be and to contribute to the mission of congregations in the world; this might include emphases on certain languages and skills, service learning, travel seminars and study away from campus with the focus on Christian service, as well as greater attention to practicing the Christian faith on campus. Congregations should challenge and support seminaries to graduate significant numbers of persons prepared to start new congregations and/or prepared to do bilingual or bivocational ministry. The communication possibilities already in existence via the internet offer faster and better ways of learning, planning, collaborating, sharing ideas, and working ecumenically and globally than anyone could have imagined when the ELCA began. Geographical boundaries and limitations are lessening daily and new forms of ministry served by technology may be limited only by lack of imagination. This allows congregations to be full partners with each other and with other entities in the ELCA and elsewhere in Christ's church.

Concluding Thoughts

Some of the documents we received made it sound as if people are embarrassed to speak about Jesus (God and "grace" seemed more acceptable) or about things Lutheran. If it were not for Jesus we wouldn't be Christians and if it were not for the Reformation we wouldn't be Lutheran Christians. But that's who we are. Let's not hide it or run from it or try to pretend we're something else. (I think that it is not that justification by faith has been tried and found wanting, but that it hasn't been tried.) Even the Bible often was noticeable by its absence. If that is not our source we might as well fold up our tents now.

This is a statement I find insightful (from Braaten & Jenson's *Christian Dogmatics* 2:407): "The assertion of 'justification by faith' in the sixteenth-century Reformation can be understood only if it is clearly seen as a complete break with 'justification by grace'." All church bodies and antagonists in the Reformation believed that salvation comes by God's grace; that's not what the disagreement was about. The conflict was about how people received God's grace (and what grace is). The reformers rejected the medieval church's teaching that grace was a "substance" or power which God gave to people through the church's sacraments so that people would be able to cooperate with God in becoming righteous. This they judged to be wrong in two ways. First, according to the N.T. God's saving "grace" is not some "thing" that we get; rather, it is God's favor, God's graciousness toward us. Second, if grace is understood in a pre-Reformation framework of "works righteousness" (that is, that we become righteous in God's eyes and merit our salvation by doing good works, albeit grace-empowered works), it loses its graciousness. As in: God has done God's part by giving us grace and now it is up to us to do something with it. In place of this, the reformers understood grace as God's favor toward us, enacted above all in the sending of God's son who through his death and resurrection accomplished everything necessary for our salvation altogether apart from our merit or righteousness.

The gospel (the good news) is that on account of Christ God forgives our sins and sets us free to live trusting that good news for our righteousness before God and therefore also free to direct our works to our neighbors who need them. Not that our sins are not serious—they are so serious that the son of God had to die because of them—but that though we are sinners God pardons us. Our sins are not counted against us and we are restored to full citizenship in God's kingdom. The gospel does not say that we are not guilty; it says that we are guilty, but that God pardons us on

account of Christ. It doesn't say that now that Jesus has done his part, we need to do our part; rather, it says that there is no way we can earn a right relationship with God and we don't have to, because it has been given to us. Living by faith means that we live trusting that gracious pardon and the one who pardons us. This gospel is more real and more true than any of the things that claim to be real and true in our lives and in our world. And if that is the case, then the mission of the ELCA, of all of its parts, of every one of its members, is to proclaim, teach, and live this truth. Everything else is secondary, no matter how important. Everything else needs to serve the gospel or all those other things will be in vain.

The danger of strategic planning is that the plan and we who do the planning become more important than the ultimate reason that we are planning in the first place. The importance of strategic planning when it develops from the true center is that through the planning process and through implementing the plan the true center becomes the center for everyone and every activity and every organization. May the Holy Spirit guide this process toward what God wills for the ELCA.