

A Vision Re-Focus
Southeastern District - LCMS
June 2013

An Overview

Many would look at the future of Christianity in the United States and say that the situation is dire. Mainline Protestant Churches, and especially those that hold on to a conservative view of Scripture, are impacted by changing mores, leading to a loss of favor in the public eye, an aging membership and infrastructure now exasperated by the recent economic downturn. While the future realities already levy heartache and pain on the institution of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod and its individual churches and schools, this promises to be among the most exciting and fulfilling time to be a Christian in the history of American Lutheranism.

This Vision Refocus is an effort to briefly tell the story of a significant paradigm change. Rather than Christians going to church, this will be a time Christians realize they are the church. We will re-discover: we are the church where we live, work, go to school, and play. This will be the time of follow-through on Luther's Reformation doctrine of the priesthood of all believers, where God's people are equipped and empowered by called workers who are using the power tools: God's Word, Holy Baptism, and Holy Communion. The called workers will also be re-formed to lead their people to a ministry outside the church walls.



Welcome to the diaspora of the 21st century. God is sending and scattering His people. As we answer this challenge and call, the Holy Spirit will enable our Word and Sacrament church not only survive, but thrive as she waits for the Advent of Jesus. In this diaspora, God's people will not be fleeing for their lives as they did in Jerusalem following Stephen's martyrdom. This diaspora is also fueled by the Holy Spirit who is calling His Church out of structures that have served Him through millennia of ministry. Even as He designed His Church to be a global church from the time of the Pentecost, He will do anything to keep His Word from getting imprisoned behind walls. For some it is simply obedience to His sending call to go where the people and the church is not present. Others of us will be forced out of our church buildings due to demographic trends, high cost, and laws that may eventually tax our institutions.

We all know, the Church is just not a building. It is a people. Jesus has placed us, His followers, in the neighborhoods where they live and given each of us the responsibility to bless those around us in such a way that they may also receive the gift of faith in Jesus.

The Facts on the Ground

Looking outside the church doors: Within the boundaries of the Southeastern District (York County, PA, Delaware, Washington DC, Maryland, Virginia, North and South Carolina live 32,225,000 people, more than 10% of the population of the United States. No other District in our church body serves as many people.



Looking inside the church doors: As it prepares to celebrate its 75th anniversary in 2014, the Southeastern District has: 205 churches; 91 schools, 45 ministries and 31 Recognized Service Organizations (RSO's). Along with the called workers we have 66,284 baptized Lutherans are members of our churches, schools and new ministries.

The New Horizon for Ministry

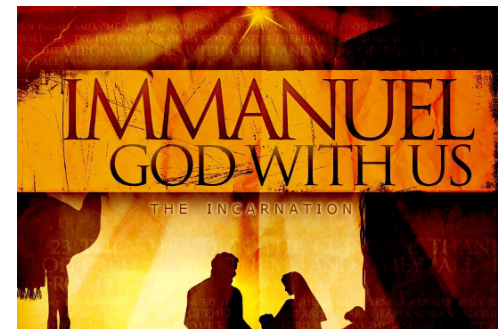
Over the last five years the Lord has given me a new perspective on His call to my wife, Connie and me. From 1988-2013, I served as Pastor of Prince of Peace Lutheran Church, Springfield, VA, a mission-minded congregation in the Washington DC suburbs. I realized that we could spend \$4 million building a new building, hire new staff, or start a new ministry, but none of those efforts would change the reality of the lives of people who lived on my street. How could that ever happen? Through whom would it ever happen? Through a series of dramatic events, the Lord helped me recognize that He was calling me to lead an effort for ministry where we lived. He called me to come home – my home, my street, my neighborhood.



Learning to be the “The Church on Trappers Place”

But what in the world was I to do? I was trained as a pastor, knew how to preach sermons, and manage a ministry, but how does one start a ministry in their own neighborhood? Those skills seemed worthless on my street. But Jesus’ own ministry and the training of his disciples gave initial clues for our beginning.

What did Jesus do? Jesus loved people. He was with them, in the middle of their lives. He came and lived among us (John 1:14) The Word was incarnational. His ministry often began with an act of mercy for someone who was trapped by some force (hunger, disease, impairment, evil spirits). He blessed people. After meeting the need, He spoke the Word of God, which became a force of change in their hearts.



I realized that I was not a good neighbor. Even though I had heard and taught the story of the Good Samaritan’s love for neighbor (Luke 10), I never actually thought He wanted me to love my specific next door neighbor. How might the body of Christ become incarnational in on Trappers Place? First lessons were: pray for my neighbors, learn their names, be available in my neighborhood, and practice hospitality. While sounding simple, I have discovered that I need to unlearn a lot of behaviors. If Connie and I would treat people on our street the same way that we treated people at Prince of Peace, eventually there would be opportunity to speak of the hope that filled our hearts.

Our church is now four strong: my wife, Connie, my daughter, Sara, and me. We take seriously the promise that where two or three are gathered that Jesus in our midst. Our fourth member, Jesus, makes the big difference. While the Church on Trappers Place is in its very beginning stages, it is a place where one day people will hear the promises of God’s Word and enjoy the blessings of

being a part of the Kingdom of God. While they may never come to Prince of Peace Lutheran Church, they will experience the kingdom of God and possibly become part of a Word and Sacrament church right where they are.

The Bigger View

Soon after realizing the call to Trappers Place, I began to realize the significance of what this meant. If this was the call to me, it was also the call to the people of my church. If 600 people were coming to church every weekend, what might happen if the church was calling, equipping, forming, empowering, and supporting them in a ministry in their neighborhoods. Now my call has been expanded to that of a ministry that includes 66,284 baptized people across the center section of the East Coast. What might happen if God's people realized their call from the Lord.



We've stumbled into the original meaning of church (ekklesia): "a people called out." Through our baptisms we were called out of all that trapped us from our Father's heart and abundant life. But we are also now being called out in another significant way.

Rather than getting people to church, we really want people to be the church where they are. This is the follow-through and full force of Luther's teaching on the "priesthood of all believers" (I Peter 2:9-10). The church is not limited to the single address of the church building. Instead, it is web-like, reaching its fingers into every neighborhood of our community. This is a whole new view of the presence and power of the incarnate body of Christ called out to the world.

Ministry of the Laity Supported by Congregations and Partnerships

The paradigm shift is subtle but significant. The local congregation is significant in the success of this ministry. This ministry demands significant upfront investment of spiritual transformation, availability, prayer, time, and energy, with little to show for it. The ministry cannot sustain itself for the long haul without the full weight of the church behind it.

The called workers (pastors and other staff members) are the trainers, equippers, and encouragers. Before they can ever adequately do that task, they must hear the Lord calling them to their own neighborhoods. They must learn through their own failure and success what it is to do this ministry. Out of their own learning they will speak with passion and lead the charge.

The resources of the church that have been organized for the people inside the church can now be utilized for the those on the outside of the church. Bible Class and catechesis are one aspect of disciple-training. Those doing neighborhood ministry will benefit from support, encouragement, and accountability from their pastor and the other lay leadership, not to mention the support of the ministries like Small Group Ministry, Stephen Ministry, prayer ministries, hospitality ministries, and children and youth ministry.



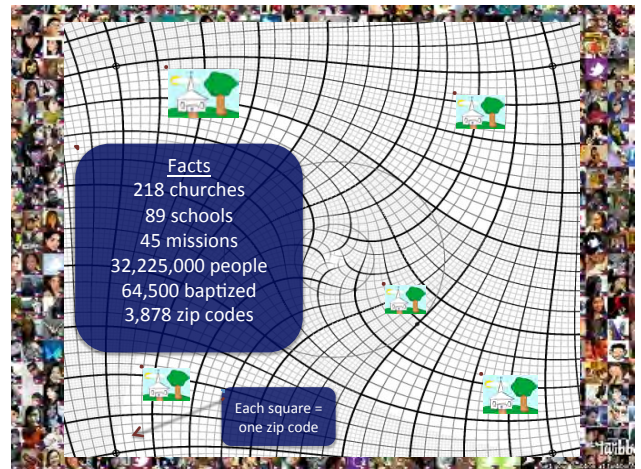
The ministry partnerships the church enjoys are also significant. Our neighborhoods are filled with people from around the world. Our urban centers are home to those who "have" and those who "have not." While many of our churches in the metropolitan areas have been hollowed out

by white flight, people are now moving to the center of the city more and more. There will be new opportunity and ministry developing at the grass root level. Questions emerge about all of the ways our partnerships become even more significant in the next decade.

Developing Organization and Strategy for Neighborhood Ministry

How do we organize ourselves to be successful in this task? We spend millions of dollars to support the organization and infrastructure within the church. We can learn from our ministry partners (Lutheran Social Services, Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Services, Lutheran World Relief) who have developed organization for a mission they support outside the church structures. What can we learn from our partners in organizing for ministry outside the church?

The United States Postal Service provides one way for us to think strategically in our mission to 32,225,000 people. In the Southeastern District are 3878 zip codes, almost 10% of 41,000 zip codes around the nation. Currently, our 205 churches have footholds of ministry in 205 zip codes. Every baptized individual who becomes accountable to their congregation for a ministry in their neighborhood becomes a ministry foothold in their zip code. On the basis of that one foothold ministry the Word of the Lord can grow to have a larger stance in that geographic area. Imagine if 5 individuals from 205 churches begin a ministry in their neighborhood. Suddenly our ministry has expanded to 1025 locations with a significant ability to touch thousands of the 32,225,000 with whom our churches currently have little or no touch.



Over a period of time, what might happen when we have an organized ministry presence in every zip code of the Southeastern District. That is only one way to prepare ourselves to be responsible for the mission God has entrusted to us. The mission to bring the Gospel to tens of millions of people is far beyond our ability and power, but with God, all things are possible.

Our Mission

In grateful response to God's grace and empowered by the Holy Spirit,
our MISSION is connecting people with Jesus.

Our Vision

Reaching our neighbors with the love of Jesus for Kingdom growth.

Presented by:
John R Denninger
President – Southeastern District
Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod
www.se.lcms.org