

**MISSION AND WELCOME:  
A COMMENTARY ON THE EASTERN SYNOD'S  
STATEMENT OF WELCOME  
IN LIGHT OF THE MISSION OF GOD**

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*“Moved, seconded and carried that, within the context of our church’s constitutions and enactments, the Eastern Synod affirm the principle that all persons are welcome to full participation in the organizational and sacramental life of this church regardless of gender, race, ancestry, colour, ethnic origin, citizenship, age, record of offences, marital status, sexual orientation, economic status, family status, or disability.” ES 04-19*

## **Introduction**

The purpose of the Christian church is mission. The mission of the church is to communicate the Gospel to all people everywhere. Anything which the church does is evaluated by whether or not said activity enables the church to fulfill its purpose more effectively. Many passages of scripture and writings from the history of the church teach us what mission means through the action of showing hospitality to strangers. The purpose of this paper is to place the “Statement of Welcome” adopted by the Eastern Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada in the perspective of the mission of the church. I will do this on the basis of six affirmations about mission contained in “Affirmations of God’s Mission” adopted by the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod in 1965.

### **1. The Church is *God’s* Mission**

The very nature of God is already hospitable. God is Trinity—in other words, God is not an isolated individual but is Trinitarian “community.” God is unity in diversity and diversity in unity. There is in God an openness to the other, a welcoming of the stranger which is expressed as the Father’s love for the Son in the Spirit. This hospitality overflows from God’s being into the act of creation. God sent forth the Word to create and preserve the universe. The Father sent the Son into the world to redeem the world. Father and Son send the Spirit to renew all creation in Christ. Christ sent forth the church in the power of the Spirit to communicate the Gospel to everyone everywhere.

The point of all this sending was to welcome God’s creation into God’s own heart. “Welcome” is not simply an agenda item for the church, it is as fundamental to the church’s very being as it is to God’s being. The church is called always and everywhere to welcome those whom God is saving, those whom God is calling to be disciples of Jesus Christ. In fact, welcome is the least the church

can do. More than passively welcoming the stranger, the church is sent specifically to the lost and troubled. Like the shepherd, the woman, and the prodigal father, God sends the church to seek, to pursue, to run after the lost. The hospitality of the Gospel mission is not passive, but active.

This mission is God's mission. Hospitality to strangers reflects the being of God. God is the one who sends and who does. God uses the church in mission and enables the church to be a blessing to the world. The church is never an end in itself, nor is its purpose self-preservation. Every ministry of the church has a missionary dimension. Christians are God's instruments of mission. When we welcome people into the community of disciples we are acting for God, extending God's welcome to all whom God is calling. The act of welcome is not so much an act of our particular congregation or our particular synod, but an act of God.

## **2. The Church is Christ's Mission to the *Whole World***

As the Gospel of John says, "For God so loved the *world* that he gave his only Son, so that *everyone* who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but so that the world might be saved through him." Jesus has sent us out into the world so that all peoples can become his disciples. This has several implications. For example, we approach "strangers" of other faiths in humility and love. We acknowledge that God is active in the lives of all people as Creator and Preserver. We share a common humanity with all people. We are all sinners and Jesus has died for all. For this reason the Gospel welcome of God through the church is extended to anyone and everyone. We simply do not have the right to turn away anyone whom God is calling to faith. We cannot restrict the Gospel message because of our own fears and prejudices.

We Lutherans in Canada have had a great deal of difficulty in extending the welcome of the Gospel to "strangers" who are truly different from us. It is difficult for us to welcome African-, Asian-, or Latino-Canadians as full partners in discipleship. Our fears keep us from opening our arms to the poor and homeless. Gay and lesbian people do not always feel fully included in our congregations. Even though our ancestors came here as immigrants who did not speak English, we limit our hospitality to new "strangers." Many of our buildings are not accessible to people with special needs. As a result many of our congregations are slowly dying. Before long we may need to welcome missionaries from Eritrea or New Guinea or Guyana to help us revitalize our church.

The statement of welcome, then, is a challenge and a promise. It is a challenge to us to do what God has called us to do: to communicate the Gospel of Jesus Christ to any and all who need to hear the Good News spoken to them. The statement of welcome is also a promise, the promise of God's hope for us that we will truly be Christ's mission to the whole world. Who knows what might happen if we welcomed all whom God is sending to us?

## **3. The Church is Christ's Mission to the *Church***

Every Christian is baptized into Christ. The faith which the Spirit creates in our hearts is the presence of Christ our Lord and brings us into a real and living unity with all Christians everywhere. The same Word which calls us to go and preach the Gospel to every nation also calls us as a

community of disciples to teach and live everything Christ has taught. That means that we have the task and the blessing of growing as communities which hear the Gospel, celebrate the Gospel, and shape our community life according to the Gospel. Welcoming the stranger is central to this growth. The stranger who comes into our midst brings us gifts beyond what we might have imagined, gifts which God is longing to give to us.

To obey what Christ has taught means that together as a community we will search the Scriptures, we will listen to and learn from each other, and we will witness the Gospel to each other. If we are all alike, there is less chance for learning and growth in faith.

Our particular Lutheran identity can also be a means of extending God's Gospel hospitality. We see our role within the ecumenical church to be a movement whose purpose is to witness to the Gospel within the whole body. In a spirit of welcome we will use our creeds and confessions as a means to confess Christ, not as an excuse to stop communication. We will work together on any project that will extend the Gospel and resist together every force that would truncate the Gospel or deny God's Word. We will nurture, edify, and educate one another in Christ.

#### **4. The Church is Christ's Mission to the *Whole Society***

Jesus Christ is Lord of every area of life and the church recognizes no spheres of life which are outside of the Lordship of Jesus Christ. The secular is the spiritual and the spiritual is the secular. The disciple community works in the world as one aspect of our common and individual calling to follow Christ. Our goal is to promote the well-being of all people, no matter who they are or what their place in society might be. We will welcome people of every sector of society into our congregational communities.

We recognize that there is some ambiguity in identifying exactly where and how God is working in the world to bring the fulfillment of God's reign, but we will not allow this ambiguity to silence us or to prevent us from taking actions which embody hospitality to the stranger. We will serve God in all of our occupations and exercise our ministry where we are. We will seek the peace of the city and work together with anyone who is working for the health and well being of the community. We will work to extend justice, social acceptance, and a full share of God's bounty to all people, fighting discrimination and oppression wherever we find it. We will especially speak and take action against racism, classism, sexism, ageism, and discrimination based on differing abilities and sexual orientation. We will always remember that our Lord was arrested, tried, and executed by the political and religious authorities of his day.

#### **5. The Church is Christ's Mission to the *Whole Person***

Just as God has created and preserved whole persons, so God's love and the gift of salvation is intended for whole persons—body, intellect, spirit, and life force. Our model is always the incarnation of the Word as a whole and complete human being and his ministry of healing, feeding, forgiving, and freeing. Because Christ has opened our eyes, we remember that he is present among us in the hungry, naked and imprisoned. We believe that a faithful witness to the Gospel cannot include forcing people to deny that which is essential to their humanity, whether that be race,

ethnicity, culture, language, gender or whatever. Hospitality is hospitality and cannot be grudgingly given on condition of conformity.

Whenever we encounter a person, we encounter someone who is a totality. It is to *persons*, not to any one part of persons, that God has sent the church. Thus the mission of the church includes education, health care, economic development, mental health, social needs, and advocacy of all kinds. Anything which enhances the life of the human community is a gift of God. To serve the needs of and offer hospitality to whole persons is to take Christ's ministry seriously.

## **6. The Whole Church is Christ's Mission**

Every Christian is made a missionary in Baptism. The same Holy Spirit who makes us all alike God's children also commissions us all alike as witnesses to Christ. Anything which divides the people of God is to be deplored, whether that be the division of racism, sexism, classicism, ageism, clericalism, or any other of the "isms" that we seem so adept at creating. It is the mission of the church to bring an end to wars and the political and social tensions which divide people from people. Our congregational communities are called to reflect the wholeness, the *shalom*, which God intends for all creation. Welcome, hospitality, is a means through which wholeness can be visibly expressed.

The desecration of Christianity by the multiplication of divisions in the church is an affront to the Gospel. The division of the church—whether that division is between "blacks" and "whites" or between "straights" and "gays" or between "liberals" and "conservatives"—is a stumbling block to many who would believe and contradicts the unity of Christ's disciples for which he prayed (John 17). The person who is most different from us, the person with whom we disagree the most, can be welcomed in the name of Jesus. The Holy Spirit is working mightily to enable the church to be whole in a unity which honors the diversity of God's people.

## **Conclusion**

Perhaps we do not realize what a radical step the delegates to the Eastern Synod took in passing motion 04-19. We have committed ourselves to welcome all persons into our congregations "regardless of gender, race, ancestry, colour, ethnic origin, citizenship, age, record of offences, marital status, sexual orientation, economic status, family status, or disability." When we do that, God will use hospitality to strangers to make some radical changes among us. At this point it may be difficult for us to imagine exactly what our congregations and synod might look like. We may well be afraid of the changes we say we are committed to. At the very least our congregations will look quite different than they do now.

We live in the tension between the wholeness of God's truth and our own imperfect understanding of that truth. We recognize that our witness to the Gospel must be continually corrected by the Spirit. In spite of our errors and divisions, we believe that all who follow Christ can rejoice in one another, preach Christ crucified and risen, and join together in the mission of the Gospel in the world. The Triune God, whose very nature is hospitality to strangers, truly does welcome all and sends all out in mission.