

## A THEOLOGY OF MISSION AND THE MISSIONAL CHURCH IN THE UNITED STATES<sup>[1]</sup>

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The occasion for this paper is the second annual consultation of the Western Mission Cluster (WMC) of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA). This cluster serves the educational needs for life-long learning in Regions 1, 2 and 3 of the ELCA. The challenge before the representatives of this cluster is to find ways to enhance and mobilize mission within and through the 3,345 congregations and 1,731,982 baptized members who make up the ELCA presence of the church in these regions.

President David Tiede, of Luther Seminary, encouraged last year's gathering to reflect carefully on the work that has already been done through a variety of agencies, task groups and institutions of the church to enhance mission in the 3 regions. "Our goal," he stated, "is learning that will renew the church. . . Our method is education, training, and resources for leadership for Christian communities in mission." His focus was on developing a culture of learning that will promote a genuine Christian discipleship as the foundation of effective Christian leadership. His exhortation to the WMC was to empower congregations as learning communities, and to equip members to fulfill their vocations in the world as disciples of Christ. This effort, he rightly noted, will require new approaches within both learning and educational processes, and fresh approaches to engaging in collaboration and networking.<sup>[1]</sup>

President Tim Lull, of Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary, stated to last year's gathering that the various subsystems of the life-long learning continuum "must intentionally work together to have maximum success." This, he observed, will stretch many of the subsystems. They will have to learn to live beyond the assumptions of their own worldviews, in addition to living outside the familiar space of their own organizational cultures. But he also observed, that it is often from the influence of "outside forces" that creative change is introduced, even if the change process introduces pain and encounters resistance. The challenge before the WMC, he stated, "is to determine what things can be experienced and learned at what points in the informal and formal life long learning continuum to maximize competence (for ministry)."<sup>[2]</sup>

Both of these papers tended to focus more on matters of **process** than on issues of **content** relative to engaging in the practice of life long learning. But they did help identify many of the issues which must be given attention if the WMC is to develop an effective system of life long learning for pastors, congregations, and members. President Lull included in his paper a section on "content issues," although most of these dealt with environmental changes that are now impacting educational systems. Within this section, however, he raised an important observation, stemming from a workshop that he had recently attended. He

noted that there was “a real lack of consensus on what it means for the church to be in mission – what is the mission of the church.”<sup>[3]</sup>

This issue, “What is the mission of the church?” represents the occasion for this paper. As the author of this paper, I was invited to develop a response to this question for the purpose of helping the second annual WMC consultation reflect more carefully on the content that is required to bring meaning to the process of life long learning. My approach will attempt to bring together the two concepts of “mission” and “church” into a synergistic synthesis. My method will be to pursue the discussion in terms of the disciplines of ecclesiology and missiology. All of this will be framed within the backdrop of the current milieu of the United States, both of the broader culture and the current state of the church within this culture.

### **Rediscovering the Church in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

*It was another typical Sunday morning in the Springdale community,<sup>[4]</sup> a somewhat typical post-World War II suburb of 25,000 persons located on the fringes of a large city of a half million population. At last count there were 26 churches that served the residents of Springdale and the surrounding area. Most had been built as congregations of various denominations during the baby-boom years of the 1950s and 1960s, but several newer independent community churches had been started in recent years. In addition, two churches had recently been formed to serve the growing number of middle-class African-American and Hispanic residents who had come to make up fifteen percent of the community’s population in the past two decades. We enter this community as various persons are getting ready to participate in worship services in the area churches on Sunday morning.*

*Jane reflected on how much she enjoyed attending worship in her church with its dignified service. She especially enjoyed the peaceful, quiet atmosphere of the building with its refined architecture.*

*Bill was thinking about the recent change in starting church at 9:00 instead of 11:00 and all the controversy that had resulted.*

*Mary was continuing to feel troubled about her church’s position on social issues and all the time it seemed to take to decide things. These decisions seemed to be getting in the way of unity in her congregation.*

*Greg had made the commitment to go to church with his wife and kids, so he was going to go with her, but he reminded her that he felt his real church was the Bible study he attended on Thursday mornings with some other businessmen.*

*Sarah, a life-long member of the Catholic Church, wondered about the Protestant Churches many of her friends attended, and wished she could have them join her at least once to experience her church.*

*Jim was continuing to think about the controversy that had surfaced at the council meeting on Thursday evening over the pastor’s authority in relation to the council’s authority. He was a businessman and wondered why his church was organized and structure this way.*

*Rev. Olson was putting the final touches on his communion message that morning as he reflected on why Word and Sacrament are so important, and how to convey this one more time in a fresh way.*

**Church.** The word "church" functions in so many diverse ways in our vocabulary. As illustrated in the lives of these residents of Springdale, seven different meanings were being used in their reflections this particular morning. These include thinking of the church as: a building, an event, a policy body, a relational group, an institutionalized denomination, an organizational style, and the practice of affirming correct confessional criteria. Each of these uses carries some truth about what we understand the church to be in the U.S. Each also conveys something of the challenge we face in trying to understand the church in this setting.

What exactly are we dealing with when we talk about the church? The church is certainly more than a physical structure that occupies a specific street address. It is more than a programmed event that we attend at a certain time of the week. The church is more than a set of policy choices that define how resources are to be allocated, and it is more than one's personal relationship experiences with other believers. The church is certainly more than a historical denomination that has become institutionalized. It is more than a particular type of organizational structure. And the church is definitely more than a set of confessional beliefs that are communally affirmed.

The church does exist in relation to all these various characteristics. But the church is without a doubt more than any one of them, or, for that matter, is more than all of these elements combined. When we encounter the church, we move into spiritual territory that occupies earthly terrain. We encounter the living God in the midst of our human condition. We encounter the Spirit of God dwelling in the midst of a people who are created and formed into unique communities. As these unique communities study the Bible, examine their history, and explore their settings, they take on particular names, styles, structures, and behaviors – and they become diverse.

**Church in the Context of the United States.** If there is anything we have in the United States it is plenty of churches. Their presence is deeply woven into our national story. They are so much a part of the landscape that we tend to take them for granted. The variety of churches serving the suburb of Springdale is typical of communities across our country. Such variety - churches come with a wide array of names and labels. But these diverse churches serve as important social institutions. We know that churches serve as a primary point of religious identity for millions of people in local communities.<sup>[5]</sup> Such numbers – we are all aware that churches are quite plentiful. In the U.S., we find over 300,000+ congregations with most being linked together within several hundred denominations.<sup>[6]</sup>

Today in the U.S., we are poignantly aware of the diversity and endless multiplication of the church, an awareness that at times may cause us to lose sight of the uniqueness of the church as the creation of the Spirit. We are forced to try and make sense of a complex array of denominations, missional structures, and local congregations where all claim to be part of the Christian movement. It is helpful to examine these three forms in a little detail to appreciate this complexity.

**Denominations** are the way that most persons in the U.S. encounter the institutional character of the church. What is interesting to note is that this form of church is a fairly recent invention in church history, only about two centuries old.<sup>[7]</sup> The denomination, however, found fertile soil within the emerging colonies and territories of what later became the United States. While about 50 denominations account for the vast majority of the Christian population in our country, there are actually several hundred that dot the landscape. This form of the church, though recent in history, has been dynamic in structure. It has gone through at least five identifiable phases of growth and development.<sup>[8]</sup>

### **Historical Development of Denominations**

#### **Phase I: Ethnic-Voluntarism Denomination 1600 – 1800**

This denominational type emerged in the early seventeenth to late eighteenth centuries, and functioned as a coalition of ethnic immigrant churches of European parentage.

#### **Phase II: The Purposive-Missionary Denomination 1800 - 1850**

During the first half of the nineteenth century this denominational type was formed as a national organizational structure responsible to introduce new churches into the expanding frontier.

#### **Phase III: The Churchly Denomination 1850 - 1900**

During the last half of the nineteenth century denominations transitioned to this type as they built extensive institutional systems to serve the needs of their members.

#### **Phase IV: The Corporate Denomination 1900 - 1965**

During the first half of the twentieth century, denominations created multiple agencies within an extensive bureaucratic hierarchy to manage the ministry of member churches.

#### **Phase V: The Regulatory Denomination 1965 to present**

In the last half of the twentieth century a type of denomination has emerged that increasingly uses rules and policies to secure compliance from member churches.

This diversity in the growth and development of denominations is complemented by the complexity of our attempts to explain their existence. Should we think of them primarily in theological, historical, sociological, or organizational terms, or in all of these ways?<sup>[9]</sup> What is clear is that denominations are a way of life and must be reckoned with if we are to make sense of the church in the U.S. This represents one of the primary challenges in trying to recover biblical and theological foundations for understanding the church.

A second way we encounter the church is in a variety of **missional structures**. Some of these exist inside of denominations as connectional structures (what are often referred to as ecclesiastical structures). We find, for example: dioceses for Roman Catholics, conferences for United Methodists, synods for the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, presbyteries for Presbyterians (USA), classes for the Reformed Church in America, associations for Southern Baptists, etc. The purpose of these ecclesiastical structures is

to bring a common order and shared life to the various member congregations. Other missional structures also exist within denominations as agencies designed to carry out various aspects of denominational ministry.<sup>[10]</sup> Thus we find home mission agencies, foreign mission agencies, educational agencies, service agencies, justice agencies, publishing agencies, etc. It should be noted that most of the educational agencies consisting of Christian colleges and seminaries in the ELCA have their core identity as such missional structures, even though their cultures and administrative practices have largely come to be shaped by academic purposes and criteria.

In addition to these connectional structures and agencies within denominations, we also encounter a wide variety of missional structures that exist independent of churches. These organizational forms have been labeled with different names, such as: para-church organizations, faith missions, mission societies, Christian movements, etc. In a suburb such as Springdale, it is common to find a variety of independent Christian organizations such as the following utilizing the time and commitment of various Christian residents.

### **Typical Independent Missional Structures**

- Young Life group at the local high school
- Businessmen and women involved in area chapters of Christian Business Men's Association and Christian Business Women's Association
- Various groups of men meeting in churches in relation to Promise Keepers
- Numerous women involved in Bible Study Fellowship
- Several families supporting staff working with Campus Crusade for Christ
- A staff member who works for Child Evangelism Fellowship
- Several doctors who volunteer time with the Luke Society

The need for such organizations is usually justified on the basis that they exist to carry out some specialized ministry.<sup>[11]</sup> Each sees its specialized ministry as being beyond the capacity of local congregations to fulfill, or as being necessary in order to bridge past the provincial character of denominational systems.

Another form in which we encounter the church, and perhaps the most basic way, is in terms of **local congregations**. Thinking of congregations as being the church is probably the most familiar pattern for the vast majority of practicing Christians. Although this expression of the church has firm biblical foundations, its development in the U.S. has been quite diverse. Congregations vary with respect to the historical growth of the various phases of denominations. Thus, we find: ethnic-village congregations, purposive-village congregations, institutional congregations, organizational congregations, and lifestyle congregations, all of which continue to exist as inter-woven layers within the broader system of denominations.<sup>[12]</sup>

Learning to understand a particular congregation is a complex task and one must take into account

the historical developments surrounding it. But if one is going to provide effective leadership for a congregation today, there are a host of other factors that must also be given careful attention. These complexities include such internal factors as: membership size, ministry style, program model, organizational structure, volunteer involvement, the physical plant, and financial resources. These complexities also include such external factors as location, traffic patterns, population characteristics, and community needs.<sup>[13]</sup> Local congregations are complex creations of the Spirit that require leaders to exercise a rather sophisticated set of management and organizational skills in order to give direction to the work of the Spirit in their midst.

This diverse set of organizational forms - denominations, missional structures, and local congregations - raises some basic questions. Where did they come from? How do they express biblical foundations and historical legitimacy as the church? What is their purpose? What is their future? Such questions are academically interesting on their own terms, but they are also becoming important for many church leaders today for very practical reasons. Churches are confronted by the challenging complexities of modern life and the realities of the emerging postmodern condition,<sup>[14]</sup> and most are finding it difficult to define their role in our changing context. Many of these structures are struggling to redefine their very reason for existence. This is one area where the emphasis of life long learning in the WMC needs to concentrate its attention. But the focus needs to be primarily on helping leaders and congregations develop new missional structures, rather than on trying to provide remedies for survival.

It is interesting to note how others are responding to this challenge. There is a decided lack of a true missional approach. As mentioned earlier, church leaders today are required to exercise a rather sophisticated set of management practices and organizational skills to guide the church's ministry. A current management practice many church leaders are using is clarifying values, defining the mission, and focusing a vision as a response to a changing context and shifting culture. In regard to organizational skills, many leaders are focusing on reshaping existing structures to increase organizational effectiveness.

Such management practices and organizational skills are important matters to address in the life and ministry of the church. But their use has often become part of the problem. We have been inundated over the past several decades with a variety of approaches that call for better management and more effective organization within the church. These include the church renewal movement of the 1960s - 1970s, the church growth movement of the 1970s - 1980s, and the church effectiveness movement of the 1980s - 1990s.<sup>[15]</sup> As helpful as many of these functional and organizational emphases have been, they have often betrayed deeper realities about the church that must be addressed.

**The Church Is the Solution - a Functional Approach.** An example of missing some of these deeper realities can be found in the recent effectiveness literature. Here we find an emphasis on focusing the ministry of the church to respond to a changing context. This theme usually emphasizes the importance of rediscovering the biblical ministry of the church, and using these insights to make the ministry of the church more relevant to today's world. This approach proceeds from what might be described as a functional view of the church, one which defines the church primarily in terms of what it does. The



emphasis is placed on the ministry that the church is responsible to carry out. Reshaping a church's ministry is seen as the solution for responding to a new or changed ministry context. The current effectiveness literature describes a variety of such functional approaches for defining the church and its ministry.

### **Current Examples of Functional Approaches**<sup>[16]</sup>

- **Seeker-Sensitive Church** – an emphasis on conducting services reflecting worship that are shaped for evangelism in reaching unchurched persons
- **Purpose-Driven Church** – an emphasis on defining clearly the purpose of the church around core functions and building intentional processes of discipling
- **Small Group Church** – an emphasis on using small groups as the critical infrastructure for church life in complement with gathered celebrative worship
- **User-Friendly Church** – an emphasis on developing processes around key biblical principles that attract people into high-commitment communities
- **Seven-Day-a-Week Church** – an emphasis on expanding group-based, week-day ministries as multiple points of entry into the life of the church
- **Church for the 21st Century** – an emphasis on developing a church as a major anchor of ministry that can specialize in a variety of niche markets

Many of the books proposing such approaches provide keen insights into developing aspects of the ministry of the church. They also provide some helpful perspective on adapting this ministry to respond to our current culture. All of these approaches, however, tend to treat the church in functional terms. They develop their view of the church primarily on the basis of what churches do. “Doing” the church's ministry is absolutely essential to a full view of the church. But such a functional approach to defining the church leaves some basic questions regarding the nature of the church unaddressed.

**The Church Is the Problem - an Organizational Approach.** There is also a current literature that analyzes the organizational structure of the church as its primary emphasis, especially in relation to churches encountering changing contexts. Here, the focus is on diagnosing aspects of the organizational life of the church and applying these insights to the critical task of reinvigorating ministry. Perspectives from the organizational and managerial sciences are usually incorporated into this restructuring work in what might be described as an organizational view of the church. An organizational view defines the church in terms of its structures, procedures, and decision-making processes. The emphasis is on solving problems in the church's organizational life to improve its ministry. Recent examples in the literature of such organizational approaches include the following.

### **Recent Examples of Organizational Approaches**<sup>[17]</sup>

- **Denominational Cultures** – An analysis and classification of denominations based upon their theological views and social attitudes, along with changes in these patterns over time.
- **Congregational Studies** – The use of theories and tools from the social sciences to evaluate and explain contextual and institutional characteristics of congregations.
- **Church Growth/Decline** – Measuring and evaluating patterns of growth and decline within congregations and denominational systems.
- **Reinventing Denominations** – An application to denominational systems of the current

organizational approaches to reengineering institutional structures.

- **Quality Evaluation** – An application to the organizational life of churches of the current literature on total quality management and outcome-based evaluation.
- **Systems Management** – Use of a systems’ approach from organizational theory to understand and improve the management of church organizations.

Many of the books taking such approaches provide helpful insights into understanding the organizational dynamics of churches, and most suggest ways in which church systems and structures might find renewal for ministry. All of these approaches, however, tend to treat the church in sociological or organizational terms. They develop their view of the church primarily in terms of the structures that make up the organizational life of churches. An understanding of the church’s structural character is absolutely essential to a full view of the church, but this approach also leaves unaddressed some basic questions regarding the church's nature.

**The church is.** Failing to understand the nature of the church can lead to a number of problems. Defining the church functionally - in terms of what it does - can shift our perspective away from understanding the church as a unique community of God's people. In place of this, the church tends to become a series of ministry functions such as worship, education, service, and witness. Defining the church organizationally - in terms of its structures - can shift our perspective away from the spiritual reality of the church as a social community. Instead, the church becomes a patterned set of human behaviors that need to be structured and managed.

These approaches reduce the church to a set of ministries administered through management skills to maintain effectiveness, or to an organization designed to accomplish certain goals. These functional and organizational approaches can too easily seduce leaders into placing too much confidence in their managerial skills, or their use of organizational techniques, to find solutions to the problems facing the church. A recent article in *The Atlantic Monthly* focused national attention on getting ready for the “next” church where the key to success is outlined in terms of functional ministry that is culturally relevant and organizationally sound.<sup>[18]</sup> It is my conviction that we are in need of moving beyond trying to find the "next" church that will help us be successful one more time. We are in need of rediscovering something more basic about what it means TO BE the church.

Functional and organizational approaches in understanding the church reflect the ways in which these approaches rely on the social sciences. While insights from the social sciences can be quite helpful in understanding some aspects of the church, this perspective tends to give primary emphasis to the human dimensions of church life. The church is not just another human organization that happens to have a different mandate for its life and ministry. The church is about human behavior that is being transformed through God's redeeming power, and about patterns of life that reflect redemptive purposes. Use of the social sciences must be kept in perspective within a theological framework, and must be placed in relationship to the spiritual dynamics of God's redemptive presence in the church. Therefore, it is critical that we consider the **nature** of the church before proceeding to define its **ministry** and **organization**. To do so, we must start from a theological perspective.



This is the view of a number of observers, especially those dealing with the relationship between gospel and culture, who point out that something more fundamental is going on in today's discussion about the church.<sup>[19]</sup> The issue is not so much our ability to focus the ministry of the church, or our ability to analyze and renew existing church structures. The more basic issue we face is the very way we think about the church. The critical question is, "What is the church?" To answer this question, we must understand the nature of the church. We must understand that the church's nature is unique, and that this unique nature is the result of the work of God's Spirit in the world. Understanding this unique nature provides the necessary perspective for addressing the ministry and organization of the church.

### **The Crux of the Argument: The Church Is Created by the Spirit**

We must understand that the church is more than real, it is more than just what meets the eye from a human perspective. It is more than just a set of well-managed ministry functions. It is more than just another human organization. The church lives in the world as a human enterprise. But the church is also the called and redeemed people of God. It is a people of God who are created by the Spirit to live as a missionary community. As such, the church is both a social organization and a spiritual community. (The reader should note that the word "social" as it is used here, and throughout the rest of this paper, is referring to a "human community of persons in relationship with one another.")

There is a duality within the church's nature.<sup>[20]</sup> We must understand this duality if we are to address properly the ministry and organization of the church. The church is God's personal presence in the world through the Spirit. This makes the church, as a spiritual community, unique. The church exists in the world with human behaviors organized within human structures as a social reality. But it expresses such human behavior through the redemptive power of God by the presence of the Spirit. This is the duality that is inherent within the church's nature.

This paper argues that distortions exist today for most Christians in the U.S. in the way they think about the church. There is a distortion in what we understand the church's nature to be - what the unique character of the church is as a community of God's people. There is a distortion in what we understand the church's ministry to be - what the full expression of living as a community under God's kingdom reign is like. There is a distortion in what we understand the church's organization to be - how the church is to structure itself to carry out its ministry consistent with its nature. We are in need of fundamentally rethinking our understanding of the church in terms of its nature, ministry and organization.

We can best begin this rethinking by drawing on the insights developed within two different but complementary theological disciplines. Both disciplines seek to understand the life and ministry of the church in light of God's mission in the world. What follows in this paper is a frequent use of ideas drawn from these two disciplines. For readers who may not be familiar with the technical terms, it is important at this point to introduce and define them. One theological discipline is the field of missiology – the study of mission. The other theological discipline is the field of ecclesiology – the study of the church. Their definitions are as follows:

**Missiology: The Study of Mission** - This field of theological study focuses on how to proclaim the gospel and grow the church in different cultural contexts. Attention is given to such matters as: mission theology, world religions, cross-cultural communication, training missionaries, mission methods, church planting, and evangelism. All of this is framed in light of God's mission in the world.

**Ecclesiology: The Study of the Church** – This field of theological study focuses on understanding the church in terms of its nature, ministry, and organization. Attention is given to such matters as: biblical and theological foundations, historical ecclesiologies (different views of the church in different periods of time), and church polity (how different churches have been organized). All of this is related to God's redemptive purposes in the world.

It is obvious that there are many natural points of overlap within these two theological disciplines. But for a variety of reasons, they have developed separately within the life of the church in the U.S., and also within the teaching that takes place in many theological seminaries and Christian colleges. Discovering the common ground between these disciplines and identifying their relationship is critical if we are to proceed with the task of rethinking the church in the U.S. It is of significance to note the extent to which the ELCA, in its “11 imperatives” relating to theological education, seeks to bring these two streams together. What is now needed is a full integration of this way of thinking within our institutional practices and organizational cultures.<sup>[21]</sup> It is to this task that we turn in the next section.

## **Developing a Missional Understanding of the Church**

*Bill, Greg, and Jim were having their regular Monday morning cup of coffee at the local Starbucks that had recently opened in the shopping center that served the Springdale community. The conversation turned to religion and what was going on in their local congregations.*

*Bill mentioned his recent appointment to the evangelism committee of his church, Wesley United Methodist. This had occurred after he spoke up at the yearly congregational meeting a few months back regarding the need for his church to be more concerned about evangelism in the Springdale community. He was trying to figure out what this new responsibility entailed. It was not very clear how the work of this committee related to the rest of the ministry of the church. Did it mean that he and other committee members were supposed to knock on doors in the neighborhood? Or, was his committee responsible to train other church members to do evangelism?*

*Greg indicated that he had tried for years to do evangelism through his local church, Springdale Presbyterian (USA), but had eventually given up. He and others who had a burden in this area had tried to introduce a training program called Evangelism Explosion, and had been successful in mobilizing about twenty members for awhile. But after about two years, it became evident that the church didn't know how to enfold the several persons who had come to faith through their work. In frustration, Greg moved on to join the Christian Business Men's Association (CBMC) where he and others regularly saw friends coming to faith in Christ. He did note, though, that most of these persons never developed any strong association with a local church, since their involvement in*

*CBMC seemed to be sufficient in meeting their spiritual needs.*

*Jim joined in the conversation by mentioning that he was serving on the missions' committee of his church, Woodlawn Southern Baptist. There was a strong support of foreign missions in his congregation, and he noted that over thirty percent of the total church revenues went yearly to this effort. Most of this money was raised at the annual weeklong Missions Festival. His committee was busy planning this year's Festival and was adding to the normal agenda of missionary speakers, some personnel who represented Christian service organizations in the local urban area. The theme for this year's event was "Across the Sea – Across the Street." They were hoping to mobilize more of their members into personal involvement in local missions' work, beyond just giving their dollars to overseas missions.*

This conversation reflects the way that most Christians in the U.S. encounter the concepts of missions and evangelism. Missions is usually understood as something churches support, as something that takes place somewhere else through specially trained personnel known as missionaries. Evangelism is usually understood as something a few persons do in a local congregation through a committee, or as one of the programs of the church, or as something done in and through a para-church organization like CBMC. There are two fundamental problems related to these understandings. First, they fail to relate missions and evangelism adequately to the larger framework of the mission of God. And second, because of this, they fail to understand the relationship of the whole life and ministry of the church in relation to God's mission in the world.

### **Relating A View of Mission to an Understanding of the Church**

The concepts of church and mission represent two important ways of thinking about God's work in the world. The development of our understanding of the **church** has a long history. It starts on the pages of the New Testament and continues over the centuries as the church develops different views for defining its life and ministry in the world. These views, or self-understandings of the church, are what are known as different ecclesiologies. *An ecclesiology is simply a summary of what the church, working within a particular historical context, believes the Bible to teach about the character and purpose of the church in relation to that setting.*

Our understanding of the concept of **mission** has a little different heritage. Its role in the life of the church in the New Testament is clear from the story of the expansion of the Christian movement into the first century world. It is also clear that mission activity took place through the church within different periods of the church's history as the Christian movement spread into new areas. However, a specialized meaning became associated with this concept in the rise of the modern missions' movement over the past 200 years.

Scores of mission societies came into existence both through and alongside the churches in the West. These structures were designed to carry the message of the gospel to other places in the world and extend the work of the church at home. William Carey articulated this approach in his famous treatise in 1792. His view was that missions is a specialized function grounded primarily in the biblical commitment

that Christians are personally responsible to obey the great commission. This view is still practiced by large numbers of churches in the U.S. today, including many of our own ELCA congregations.

The churches in the U.S. formed numerous structures to carry out specialized missions throughout the world. This work became known as world missions and is associated with such concepts as world evangelization, church planting, and cross-cultural ministry. Churches also engaged in extensive missions' work within our country. This became known as home missions and became associated with such concepts as revivals, crusades, church extension, evangelism programs, and ministry to specialized populations. All of these efforts, both abroad and at home, are defined by the term "missions" and are viewed as the churches' responsibility to the world. In this view, missions work is one task, among several, that the church is mandated to practice. Debates often emerge within congregations over priorities in regard to these tasks, i.e. should priority be given to providing ministry to members or in doing evangelism; or how much of our budget do we send overseas versus keeping at home.

In world missions, the church delegates its work to specially called and trained persons that are known as foreign missionaries. When such persons cross salt water, they and their work often take on a "sacredness" of meaning. For missions' work within the U.S., these specially trained persons are usually referred to as home missionaries. They often work with specialized sub-populations such as Native Americans, recent immigrants, or inner-city residents, where it is common for them to start what are usually referred to as "mission churches" among these groups.<sup>[23]</sup> Within local churches, this view of missions as a specialized task is usually practiced as evangelism. The approaches taken include such things as evangelism committees, programmed gospel presentations, special training for evangelism, and above all, an expectation that each individual Christian should engage in personal evangelism. This concept is often popularized and summarized in slogans like "each one reach one."<sup>[24]</sup>

**Missions as a function** – It is important here to distinguish between the terms "mission" and "missions." That little "s" can lead to significant misunderstandings.<sup>[25]</sup> In common usage, the term "missions" describes the structures and activities that grew up during the modern missions' movement, as discussed above. These structures and activities represent a very important part of the world Christian movement. They carry out a critical aspect of the ministry of the church, and are inherently woven into its organizational life. They are important, but they must be placed in proper perspective.

These activities and structures are sometimes referred to in the singular as "mission." We see references to the "mission of the church" or the "church's mission." We need to remember that this use of the term "mission," just like the plural form "missions," deals with a functional task of church life, one of many functions the church is responsible to carry out. Understanding missions/mission as a functional task of the church only partially addresses the issue of mission.

**Mission as inherent in the church's nature** – Another understanding of mission has entered the discussion in recent decades. It needs to be distinguished carefully from missions as one functional task of the church. This understanding sees mission as inherent within the very nature and existence of the church. It starts with the triune God being a missionary God. God's missionary character is expressed, first of all, in

the work of creation. God formed a world in which the crowning element, human beings, became participants in creation's full development. After the fall, God's missionary character is again expressed in the work of redemption. God sent Jesus, the beloved Son, into the world to restore to right relationship all that was lost in the fall. God's missionary character is also expressed in the work of consummation. God will act in history to bring all of creation to a new fullness and to completion.

From this perspective, the church, existing as the people of God in the world, is inherently a missionary church. The church, in its very existence, is to participate fully in the Son's redemptive work as the Spirit creates, leads, and teaches the church to live as the unique people of God. With this understanding, the meaning of mission shifts from being a *function* of the church, to being a statement about the essential *nature* of the church. This view of mission has direct implications for all the tasks that make up the church's ministry. It shifts our understanding of both missiology and ecclesiology. It also represents a significant shift in our understanding of the nature, ministry, and organization of the church.

In making this shift, there is the realization that church and mission are not two distinct entities. They are concepts that speak about the same reality. **Whenever church and mission are presented as distinct entities, we tend to end up with dichotomies between ministry functions and competition among organizational structures.**<sup>[26]</sup> Church and mission need to merge into a common concept. Ecclesiology and missiology are not separate theological disciplines, they are, in fact, interrelated and complementary. They start at the same point, with the triune God in mission to all of creation. They speak of the same reality – the church is to participate fully in God's mission to all of creation. We need to integrate our understanding of church and mission, as well as the theological perspectives of ecclesiology and missiology. We need to develop a **missiological ecclesiology**.

### **A Missiological Ecclesiology**

Missiology and ecclesiology share much in common in their understanding of God's work in the world. Many churches in the two-thirds world have worked to integrate these perspectives. But for the most part, these disciplines continue to function as separate conversations in the setting of the U.S., where each practices its own way of framing the other. Some solutions have been tried, but most end up functionally unbalanced.<sup>[27]</sup>

Those who start with a view of the **church** and then proceed to mission usually make it a functional task of the church. This is especially true of those churches influenced by the modern missions' movement that developed during the past two centuries. Within this movement, the church is viewed in institutional terms, with mission being one of several tasks the church undertakes on God's behalf. Those who start with a view of **mission** and then proceed to the church usually treat the church in functional and organizational terms as something developed through the work of missionaries. Winning lost persons and mobilizing the church become the top priorities. This perspective often fails to incorporate an adequate understanding of the historical reality of the institutional church.

Understanding the church as being missionary by nature represents a more holistic way of thinking about mission. In this view, the Spirit-created church lives by grace as the very body of Christ in the world. It declares through its existence that the full power of God's redemptive work is already present in

the world through the Spirit. It lives as a clear demonstration that heaven has already begun for God's people. This Spirit-led community possesses all the power of God's presence, even while it awaits the final judgement of evil that will lead to the formation of the new heavens and new earth.

We in the U.S., including those of us in the ELCA, need to rediscover this understanding of church, especially if we are to have any lasting impact on shaping the lives of congregational leaders and congregations through life long learning. And we must thoroughly work this perspective into our understanding of the church's nature, ministry, and organizational life. This view of the church, best described as a **missiological ecclesiology**, is the focus of this paper.

### **Contributions from Missiology and Ecclesiology**

In recent years, significant developments in both missiology and ecclesiology have led to a better understanding that mission and church are actually addressing the same reality. These developments are helpful reference points to consider as we pursue the development of a missiological ecclesiology for our own context.

**Developments in Missiology** --The formal discipline of missiology emerged within seminary education in the late nineteenth century.<sup>[28]</sup> Its development was related to the vast expansion of the modern missions' movement then taking place from the West to the rest of the world, and it focused primarily on missions as a task of the church. A theology of mission within the modern missions' movement tended to start with the Great Commission and the call for personal obedience to carry this out by evangelizing what were usually referred to as "the heathen" or "the nations."<sup>[29]</sup> The discipline of missiology has undergone a significant shift in perspective during the past fifty years. This shift is from defining missions as being a task of the church, to understanding mission as an inherent aspect of the nature of the church. A fundamentally different starting point for shaping a theology of mission has resulted. In fact, even the concept of a "theology of mission" is being redefined in terms of "mission theology" in light of this shift.<sup>[30]</sup>

Mission theology links the missionary nature of the church to an understanding of the mission of the triune God. The understanding of the triune God in mission to all of creation was proposed under the title of *Missio Dei* by Wilhelm Anderson in 1952 at the meeting that year of the International Missionary Council (IMC) at Willingen, Germany.<sup>[31]</sup> During the 1960s, this trinitarian view of mission was reinforced by significant developments in biblical theology regarding an understanding of the kingdom of God as announced in the person and work of Jesus.

These studies identified the "already" character of the kingdom of God as being related to the presence of God's Spirit in the world.<sup>[32]</sup> These studies also identified the "not yet" aspect of this kingdom as a waiting for the final consummation and judgement of evil. The redemptive reign of God as inaugurated by Jesus was integrated with an understanding of the triune God seeking to redeem all of creation. The emerging view stressed that the mission of God in all of creation was being carried out through the church in the power and presence of the Spirit. This viewpoint has become a shared starting point for various



streams of missiology over the past several decades.

Roman Catholics began to speak and write from this perspective in conjunction with documents formulated by Vatican II in the early 1960s, and through a series of conferences in Latin America in the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>[33]</sup> This was reinforced by an important document issued by Pope Paul VI in the mid-1970s.<sup>[34]</sup> Ecumenicals began to speak and write from this perspective in relationship to the merger of the IMC into the World Council of Churches (WCC) in 1961.<sup>[35]</sup> Sponsored studies stressed the importance of framing our understanding of the church from the perspective of its being missionary by nature.<sup>[36]</sup>

This work has continued through the Commission of World Mission and Evangelism (CWME) within the WCC during the 1980s and 1990s.<sup>[37]</sup> Evangelicals began to develop this perspective on mission during the 1970s, although it was not until the 1980s that an incorporation of a *Missio Dei* perspective began to reshape the focus of many mission organizations.<sup>[38]</sup> The Orthodox Church began to utilize this perspective by the 1970s and continues to incorporate this view within its understanding of the missionary character of the church's liturgical life.<sup>[39]</sup> Pentecostals have begun to incorporate this way of thinking into their emphasis on the person and work of the Holy Spirit as being dynamic and actively present among God's people.<sup>[40]</sup> It is helpful to note here, as James Scherer points out, that "Lutherans are now in wide agreement that the kingdom of God, understood in terms of its biblical meaning, must be taken as the key term in thinking about world mission."<sup>[41]</sup> All these developments represent an amazing convergence of thought about mission theology within the diverse streams of the worldwide church.

**Developments in Ecclesiology**--At the same time that this convergence of thinking about mission theology was taking place in the discipline of missiology, there were similar developments occurring within the discipline of ecclesiology. One of the most significant was the reshaping of the Catholic understanding of the church by Vatican II in the early 1960s. The historic emphasis of the Roman Church on the institutional character of the church was modified through a conception of the church being first of all a community, a people of God in the world.<sup>[42]</sup> Complementing this in the 1970s was the ecclesiology developed by some Roman Catholics in Latin America within the base community movement.<sup>[43]</sup> This movement stressed a holistic view of ministry operating out of a conception of church as a social reality with spiritual empowerment. These views within the Roman Catholic Church have continued to mature in recent years with an emphasis on the church as a missional community.

One of the major contributions to ecclesiological thinking in the past half century has come within the ecumenical movement. Some excellent biblical and theological work was done on understanding the missionary nature of the church.<sup>[44]</sup> Of equal importance was the renewed emphasis on the church's essential unity as a visible church in the world as being foundational for its Christian witness. Lengthy studies and consultations on both "faith and order" and "life and work" were held for a number of decades leading up to the formation of the World Council of Churches in 1948.<sup>[45]</sup> These studies led the participating church bodies to explore in more detail their historic foundations and their present institutional

and organizational structures. The fruit of these conversations helped many denominational churches re-examine their ecclesiology and polity. Sometimes this work resulted in mergers between various denominations. In this regard, it is not inconsequential that Lutherans have been at the forefront of church mergers in this century, largely because of their confessional understanding of Augsburg VII that “it is sufficient.” In this work, Lutherans, as well as other churches, have come to develop a renewed appreciation for their ecclesiological heritages, even as they have come increasingly to recognize the historical, and thereby relative, character of the contextual development of such formulations.

Another development in the field of ecclesiology in the past several decades parallels that taking place in the field of missiology. This relates to a trinitarian understanding of the life and ministry of the church in the world. Recent studies on the trinity, especially among Orthodox theologians, have surfaced three different ways of relating a trinitarian understanding of God to our understanding of the church.<sup>[46]</sup> One focuses on the essence of the Godhead where the essential reality of the church is related to the very being-ness of God. Another focuses on the social reality of the Godhead as the basis for understanding the church as a social community. A third focuses on the specific roles of the three persons of the Godhead in relation to their activity in creation and recreation. This paper draws on all three of these aspects in understanding the trinitarian foundations for developing a missiological ecclesiology.

One other source contributing to our thinking about ecclesiology in recent years should be mentioned. Its origin is distinctly related to the context of the U.S. and consists of a series of applied movements taking place within existing churches. During the 1960s and 1970s, the church renewal movement placed increased importance on revitalizing existing structures.<sup>[47]</sup> During the 1970s and 1980s, the church growth movement focused new attention on taking the social context more seriously and planting churches cross-culturally. This movement also attempted, with mixed results due to inadequate theological foundations, to integrate social science methodologies more into the life-blood of churches in the U.S.<sup>[48]</sup> The 1980s and 1990s witnessed the emergence of an increasing number of mission-driven churches, resulting in the growth of a whole movement of community-based and independent congregations. This has also resulted in an increased emphasis on achieving effectiveness within established churches and denominational structures.<sup>[49]</sup> While these various movements have not developed, as such, any thoroughgoing ecclesiologies, they have surfaced important issues and provided many insights for the study of ecclesiology.

It is the theme of this paper that the insights and contributions gained from developments in the disciplines of missiology and ecclesiology need to be integrated. We are in need of relating a view of mission, one that understands the redemptive reign of the triune God working in all of creation, to our understanding of the church as both a living community of God's people and as a historical institution in the world. We are in need of developing a missiological ecclesiology.<sup>[50]</sup> Such a missiology moves beyond understanding missions as only one task of the church's overall ministry. Such an ecclesiology moves beyond understanding the church primarily in institutional terms. Understanding the church from the

perspective of a missiological ecclesiology requires that we address the interrelationship of the nature, ministry, and organization of the church.

### **A Missiological Ecclesiology Addresses the Church's Nature, Ministry, and Organization**

*Good Shepherd Lutheran (ELCA) had been formed in the Springdale community in 1953. It was now 45 years old, and had just recently entered into a strategic planning process to redefine its future. A planning committee had been formed that was responsible to lead a yearlong study for developing a comprehensive ministries plan. On this particular evening, the planning committee was to hear a report from the Mission and Evangelism Task Force. Everyone anticipated that they were going to hear an evaluation of the various efforts to recruit new members.*

*As Carl stood up to give the report, he felt a little anxious. During the past two months his task force had wrestled with their mandate. They increasingly had come to realize that mission was not a special activity that a few members were supposed to engage in on behalf of the whole church, but rather was something that had to invade the whole of the church's life. He began his report by stating this premise, and then proceeded to show how mission and evangelism needed to be a part of every ministry of the church. Starting with worship and the need to welcome the stranger, he moved to education and the need to plan for incorporating newly received adult converts. He then proceeded through the rest of the church's ministries. He finished by offering the recommendation of his task force that the church's mission and evangelism committee go out of existence and that every committee of the church be mandated with the responsibility to think in terms of mission in undertaking their responsibilities.*

*When he finished, there were a few moments of silence before the chairperson spoke up, and said, "If we accept your recommendation, it would mean that the entire church would have to focus on reaching unbelievers." "Exactly," responded Carl, "that is exactly what we should be doing as a church." "If we do this," said the chairperson, "it will require that we change the way that most of our members even think about the church."*

An ecclesiology gives expression to our understanding of the church. It seeks to address all aspects of the church's life and its ministry in the world. Many ecclesiologies, developed over the centuries in the church, have used only a select number of biblical images and passages to develop their thinking about the church. This selection of materials usually reflected the circumstances facing the church in a particular historical context. A good example of this is Augsburg VII which gives attention to the purity of the preaching of the Gospel and administration of the sacraments according to the Gospel. The choice of these two marks clearly reflects a desire to correct what were perceived abuses on the part of the Roman Church. A review of such contextual shaping of the development of various ecclesiologies exceeds the immediate purpose of this paper, but is an important topic that deserves further attention in relation to the development of a missiological ecclesiology for the churches in the U.S. The reason for this is that many of these historical ecclesiologies continue to serve as primary influences on shaping the identity and ministry of numerous churches.

In developing a missiological ecclesiology, it is important to identify what needs to be incorporated

to achieve a more full-orbed understanding of the life and ministry of the church. There are three aspects that are essential to define, and to relate to one another, in approaching such a formulation. It is important to identify what is essential for making a statement about what the church "is" – its nature; making a statement about what the church "does" – its ministry; and making a statement about "how" the church is to structure this work – its organization. All three aspects, though important and inter-related, represent different dimensions of the church.

The inter-relationship of all three aspects is clear. **The church is.** The church's nature provides the framework and foundation for understanding the essential character of the church. **The church does what it is.** The nature of the church establishes the foundation for the church's ministry and determines its direction and scope. **The church organizes what it does.** The ministry of the church introduces the activities and processes that require the development of organization within the church. What is critical to understand is that the ministry of the church flows out of the church's nature. What is also critical to understand is that the organizational life functions to support this ministry. These need to be kept in proper sequence when considering the development of a missiological ecclesiology.

**Every ecclesiology as a missiological ecclesiology.** The purpose of a missiological ecclesiology is to define the relationship of God to his people in the context of the world. In a real sense, every historical ecclesiology has functioned to some extent as a missiological ecclesiology, even though they may not have explicitly defined themselves as such. There are not multiple missions of God. God is one. God's mission in the world is one. This means that the church's understanding of its presence in the world, regardless of its existence in different contexts, should reflect its missionary nature and its understanding of the mission of God. We have much to learn from the study of historical ecclesiologies as we seek to develop a fuller understanding of a missiological ecclesiology. It is clear, however, that not all ecclesiologies have either attempted or achieved a holistic perspective on understanding the church's life and its participation in the mission of the triune God in the world. Doing so will require that we take a balanced approach in framing the inter-relationship of the nature, ministry, and organization of the church. It might be well for those of us in the ELCA to revisit our understanding and use of the formulation of Augsburg VII in light of a critique such as this.

### **The Biblical, Historical, Contextual and Developmental Shaping of a Missiological Ecclesiology**

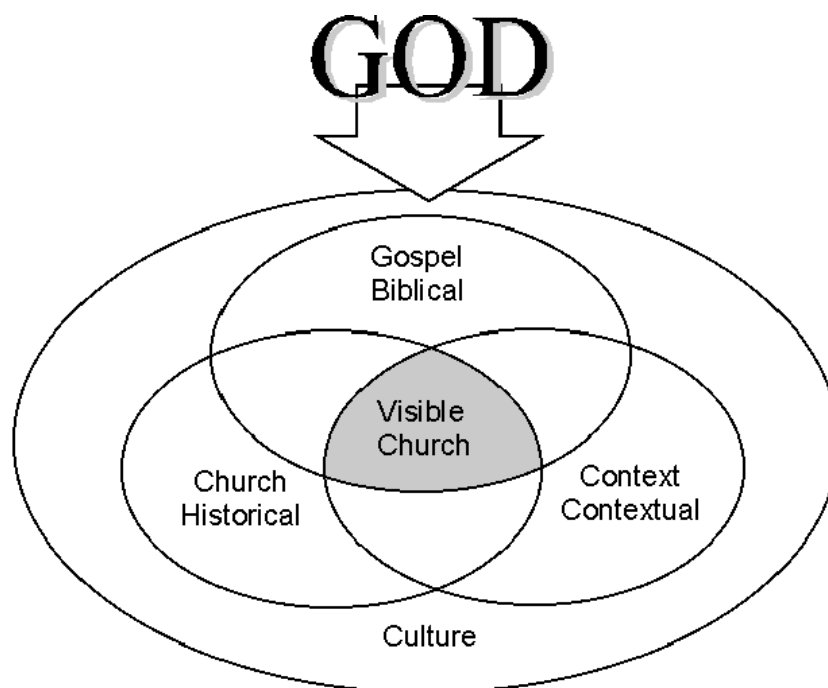
What the church believes and confesses about itself is important. These perspectives shape the identity of the church and give direction to its life and ministry. Historically, the church has tended to develop its self-understanding – various ecclesiologies – by affirming certain biblical principles in response to problems taking place within historical settings. While it is always important for the church to address specific problems that affect its life and ministry, the ecclesiological formulations that resulted have also tended to introduce problems into our understanding of the church. Particular ecclesiological formulations are often treated as if they were THE biblical teaching about the church for all time. Today, we have a variety of such particular ecclesiologies, all of which assume that they hold the proper perspective on what we should believe about the church.<sup>[51]</sup>

In the midst of these competing views regarding the church, there are many today who too readily approach the subject of ecclesiology as being obscure, unnecessary, or problematic. They tend to write off this whole discussion and proceed to make pragmatic decisions about Christian ministry as if the church could be treated primarily in functional or organizational terms.<sup>[52]</sup> Both of these developments suggest the need to take a step back from the discussion to think carefully about what shapes the formation of an ecclesiology.

**The Visible Church**--When we talk about the church, we are referring to the actual church which exists in the world, the church which we encounter in all of its multiple forms and structures. There is certainly a sense in which we can speak of an invisible church consisting of all believers throughout the ages, but the biblical record makes it clear that the Spirit is creating a church in the world which is always concrete and historical in its existence. It is this visible church with which we must reckon. It is this visible church which a missiological ecclesiology helps us come to appreciate in all of its rich diversity and complexity. It is the nature, ministry, and organization of this visible church that this paper seeks to address.

There are critical sources of information available to us for developing our understanding of the visible church as it exists in the world. God has not left us on our own when it comes to formulating a more holistic understanding of a missiological ecclesiology. It is important to identify these sources of information and define how they help us understand the church as it visibly exists in the world. There are four such sources of available information. The inter-relationship of the first three of these sources is displayed in the following diagram. Each dimension is discussed below.

### **The Visible Church in the World in Relation to Biblical, Historical and Contextual Realities**



**Biblical Perspectives on the Church**--What we believe about the church needs to be found in, and

based on, what the Bible teaches. It is critical to make biblical foundations explicit in our formulations regarding the church. It is evident, however, through even a cursory overview of scripture that the biblical materials are both extensive and diverse. Churches in different contexts drew on different images and passages, or interpreted them from different perspectives in developing their understanding of the church. We can find ecclesiologies that have conceived of the church in such diverse ways as: managing the social order, transforming society, confronting society, and living as marginalized communities.<sup>[53]</sup> The case can be made that there are biblical narratives and images available to support all these approaches.

This diversity means that the process of selecting and interpreting biblical materials in developing an ecclesiology requires the church to be aware of the limits of trying to formulate a universal understanding from within a particular context. While the framework of a missiological ecclesiology can be established, its application to different contexts will influence the selection of different biblical themes and images. But as biblical materials are selectively used, it is important to be explicit about why they are being chosen and how they are being used. This paper argues that we are in need of developing an ecclesiology from the biblical perspective of the missionary nature of the church. This is referred to as a missiological ecclesiology. It understands the church to exist in the world as the creation of the Spirit to fulfill God's purposes. Central to these purposes is the church's responsibility to participate fully in the work of the triune God.

Key themes to stress:

- God's trinitarian existence and the work of the triune God in world
- God's works of creation, redemption and consummation
- Eschatological character of the "now" and "not yet" of the kingdom of God as present in the redemptive reign of God in Christ
- Creation of the church by the Spirit – the images of the church in the N.T.
- The unmasking of the principalities and powers through the church in the world, principalities and powers defeated by God through Christ
- The holistic ministry of the church in the world that centers on reconciliation

**Historical Perspectives on the Church** – As noted above, the church exists in history as a visible reality. Its existence and life, however, have been shaped by a wide variety of cultures. Every particular ecclesiology was developed within a specific time era. This means that all thinking about the church, all ecclesiologies, reflect to some extent various historical circumstances and events. It is important in framing our understanding of the church to draw on the insights and truths that have previously been formulated. But what is also important is to utilize the key insights and teachings of historical developments without imposing a previous contextual understanding of the church on a different context as if a direct correspondence was possible.

This paper argues that we are in need of developing a missiological ecclesiology in light of diverse historical perspectives. Every historical ecclesiology addressed in some manner the missionary nature of the church. But this perspective often functioned more as a sub-text than as the main-text in defining the nature of the church. For example, as noted earlier, some ecclesiologies made mission just one of the many tasks that the church was to carry out, while primary attention was focused on the inner life of the church. Other



ecclesiologies tied the life and ministry of the church too closely to the state in some form of official establishment of the church. These approaches often ended up subverting the missionary nature of the church to national or political ends. We need to learn from these historical ecclesiologies, but we must also test them against the biblical teaching that God is a missionary God to the whole of his creation.

Key themes to stress:

- The confessional character of Christian community and living – there is an historical Christian faith
- The act of confessing by every generation in and to its context
- The corporate and communal character of Christian knowing and confessing
- The multi-cultural, multi-perspectival character of Christian knowing and confessing
- The relationship of the Bible to confessions and confessing as the norming norm

**Contextual Perspectives on the Church** --The church exists within specific contexts. Every ecclesiology developed within a particular cultural context. There is no other way to be the church except to be the church within a concrete, historical setting. This means that all ecclesiologies need to be seen as functioning relative to their context. This does not mean that they cannot be true or accurate interpretations of the biblical materials. This does mean, however, that the specifics of the ecclesiology developed are operating as a translation of the biblical perspective within a particular context. An ecclesiology being contextual is a corollary idea to the reality of an ecclesiology being historical. Historical developments have clearly made the point that new contexts required new expressions for understanding the church.

This paper argues that we are in need of developing a missiological ecclesiology that addresses the contextual character of the church. The church is catholic, or universal, in the world. This means that the church can exist within any and every culture. The church has the inherent ability to translate the eternal truths of God into relevant cultural forms within any context. This process is referred to in missiology circles as contextualization.<sup>[54]</sup> The church, first of all, must explore the teaching of the Word to understand its own identity within a particular context. Care must be taken not to compromise biblical truths to culture patterns. The church, second of all, must seek the guidance of the Spirit to translate these biblical truths in relevant ways within the particulars of its own context. And care must be taken to insure that the church relates the redemptive work of God to its particular context. As these translations vary in style and form in different contexts, the church must also develop structures to maintain community and common confession among all churches.

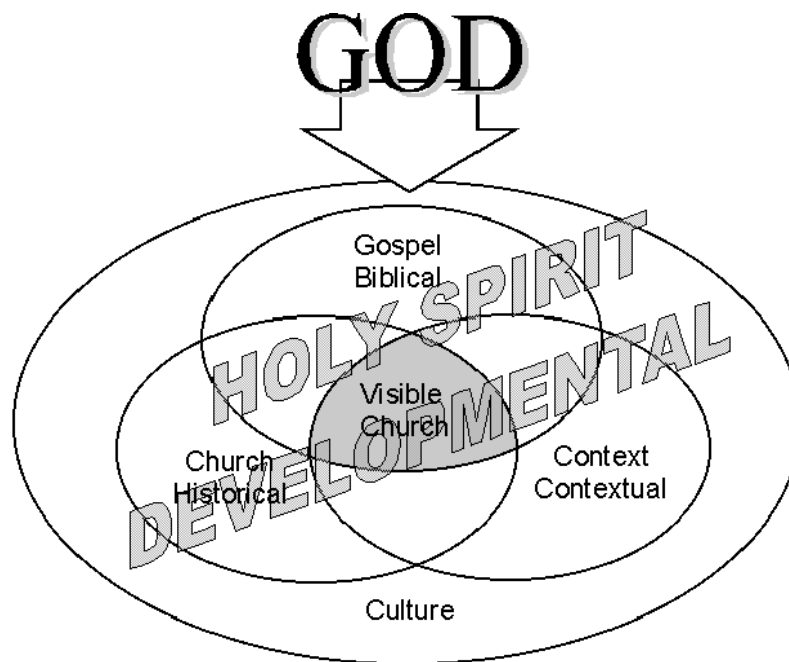
Key themes to stress:

- The reality of creation design that sets the framework for understanding the world and our human existence
- The reality of sin and brokenness within the world, and every context, which the Gospel must confront and the church must unmask
- The importance of the Gospel being good news to any and every context – contextualization as inherent within the good news of the Gospel
- The importance of balancing contextual relevance with biblical norms and confessional knowing
- God's capacity to engage particularity as a vehicle to convey eternal and universal truth – the

finite that is capable of bearing the infinite

The three perspectives of biblical, historical and contextual provide a helpful framework for thinking about the visible church. But there is one more perspective that is important to note in achieving a holistic understanding of the life and ministry of the visible church in the world. This perspective relates to the on-going work of the Spirit in leading and teaching the church which has been created. In the following diagram, this fourth perspective is added to the other three.

### **The Visible Church in the World in Relation to the Work of the Spirit**



**Developmental Perspectives on the Church**--The church exists as the creation of the Spirit. Every ecclesiology needs to build into its formulation the developmental character of the church as the creation of the Spirit. The church is not static. Ecclesiology is not static. We are in need of incorporating an understanding of the Spirit (a pneumatology) into our view, one that understands the dynamic work of the person and power of the Spirit in the midst of the church. Changing contexts require the church to address new issues in understanding its life and ministry. The church as the creation of the Spirit is always going through development and change. What the church believes and understands about itself must always be open to further development as new biblical insights emerge, historical understandings are investigated, and contextual changes occur.

This paper argues that we are in need of developing a missiological ecclesiology that bears in mind the continued work of the Spirit in leading and teaching the church. The on-going work of the Spirit needs to be cultivated as the key resource for shaping the on-going development of the church. As the church is led and taught by the Spirit, it develops new approaches to ministry and finds new ways to organize its life. This ministry and organization must take into consideration biblical teaching about the church and historical learnings about the church. But this ministry and organization must also take into consideration the

contextual realities being encountered. In doing so, the church needs to develop discipline in wisely discerning the leading of the Spirit. It needs to develop capacity to make decisions consistent with the faith and vision called for when it prays the prayer "thy kingdom come; thy will be done; on earth as it is in heaven" (Matthew 6:10).

Key themes to stress:

- That change/development is built into the very character of life both by creation design and recreation intent (sanctification)
- The conflict is inevitable within a fallen world, but can often be redeemed for good by Gospel and grace
- That the Spirit guides communities to develop discerning wisdom through conversation around the Word and prayer
- That Spirit-led discerning wisdom is a corporate and communal activity
- That the diversity of gifts are given to all God's people to participate in ministry and to contribute to discerning wisdom

### **A Missiological Ecclesiology for the U.S.**

There is a general theological framework, as expressed in the themes identify above, that can be developed for our understanding of a missiological ecclesiology. But this general framework must always be applied to the church as it exists within a specific cultural setting. This is the task of the church as it exists in the form of numerous churches throughout the world. This is the task of the church as it exists in the forms of denominations, missional structures, and local congregations in the U.S. This is the task of the representatives of the ELCA educational institutions in regions 1, 2 and 3. It is related to understanding the person and work of the Spirit, both as the Spirit creates the church and as the Spirit leads and teaches it.

This paper argues that we are in need of developing a missiological ecclesiology to address the changing cultural context in our country. It is the continued erosion of the functional "Christendom" developed within the U.S. that is forcing a new discussion.<sup>[55]</sup> It was always God's intent, even within the mission location of the U.S., that the church be a missionary church. Various churches have attempted to implement this, but their approaches have tended to operate on the notion of the church having a special status in society. What is now occurring is that the scales are falling from our eyes of the church's privileged position within church culture. With this shift, the church is rediscovering its fundamental missionary identity to live as a new community within God's redemptive reign in the broader society.

The developmental work of the Spirit needs to be affirmed and sought by the church as it exists in any setting. If the church is going to continue to speak the Word as good news to a new generation with **integrity**, it must do so in light of the biblical foundations that shape the church. If the church is going to provide a new generation with an **identity** based upon the good news of the gospel, it must do so in light of the historical development of the church. If the church is going to continue to share the Word as good news to a new generation with **relevance**, it must do so in light of changes that continue to reshape the culture. If the church is going to continue to provide **responsiveness** in giving direction to its life and work, it must do

so in light of the Spirit's continued leading and teaching. Understanding the specific context in which the church finds itself is critical for all four tasks.

## **Created by the Spirit: Let the Church Be the Church**

This paper is about understanding the church, this wonderful and mysterious creation that God has planted as his people within the world. It is about understanding the full nature of this creation of God from a missiological perspective. This is essential if we are to live into the fullness of redemption which God's story invites us to experience. This paper is especially about the missionary nature of the church that gives expression to the full character of what the church is to do in fulfilling its ministry, and how the church is to organize itself.

It is hoped that those who read this paper will discover some fresh and exciting ways to reframe some old and wonderful truths about the church. The journey of this discovery will not be without pain for any that choose to pursue it, for there is much about the church in the U.S. that is in need of careful rethinking. It will require courageous choices in order for change to be made. Such rethinking and decisions for change will invite risk and require boldness. But then, that is part of what it means to be the church.

## **Endnotes**

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[1] A similar thesis to the one presented in this paper is developed at greater length in a book that is to be published by this author in early 2000 by Baker Book House entitled (tentatively), *The Essence of the Church: A Community Created by the Spirit*.

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[1] Paper by David L. Tiede, President of Luther Seminary entitled, "The Fisher's Net: Learning Leadership for Communities in Mission."

[2] Paper by Tim Lull, President of Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary entitled, "Position Paper: Issues and Trends in Continuing Theological Education.

[3] Ibid. p. 6.

[4] The suburban community of Springdale is a composite made up of many of the churches I have consulted with over the years and many of the communities I have worked in during that time. All the illustrations reflect actual experiences in relation to these churches and their communities.

[5] A recent study that documents this is Nancy T. Ammerman, *Congregation and Community*, New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1997.

[6] Many of these denominations are rather small in terms of membership. A helpful source for getting perspective on the history, doctrine, organization, and membership of denominations is Frank S. Mead revised by Samuel S. Hill, *Handbook of Denominations in the United States*, ninth edition, Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1990.

- [7] Martin E. Marty, *Righteous Empire*, New York: The Dial Press, 1970, 67-68.
- [8] Russell E. Richey, "Denominations and Denominationalism: An American Morphology," in Robert B. Mullin and Russell E. Richey eds., *Reimagining Denominationalism*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1994, 74-98.
- [9] A discussion of these various approaches is provide by Craig Van Gelder, "Missional Challenge: Understanding the Church in North America," in Darrell L. Guder, Editor, *Missional Church: A Theological Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America*, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998, 67-72.
- [10] For a treatment of the formation of the modern denomination with its agency structures see Elwyn A. Smith, "The Forming of a Modern American Denomination," in Russell E. Richey ed., *Denominationalism*, Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1977, 108-136.
- [11] A helpful treatment of the history and development of special purpose groups within the Christian movement is provided in Robert Wuthnow, *The Restructuring of American Religion*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988, 100-131.
- [12] Van Gelder, 67-72.
- [13] A discussion of the relationship of internal and external factors on local congregation growth can be found in Wade Clark Roof et al., "Factors Producing Growth or Decline in United Presbyterian Congregations," in Dean R. Hoge and David A. Roozen eds., *Understanding Church Growth and Decline 1950-1978*, New York, NY: The Pilgrim Press, 1979, 198-247.
- [14] The discussion of postmodernism is quite complex. Some recent publications which offer perspective on this phenomenon include: Steven Best and Douglas Kellner, *Postmodern Theory*, New York, NY: The Guilford Press, 1991; Steven Connor, *Postmodernist Culture*, Cambridge, MA: Basil Blackwell, 1989; Stanley J. Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism*, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1996; Robert Hollinger, *Postmodernism and the Social Sciences*, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1994; and J. Richard Middleton and Brian J. Walsh, *Truth Is Stranger Than It Used To Be*, Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995.
- [15] A fuller discussion of this can be found in Van Gelder, 72-73.
- [16] Recent books which present these various themes are: George G. Hunter III, *Church for the Unchurched*, Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1996; Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church*, Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1995; Carl F. George, *Prepare Your Church for the Future*, Tarrytown, NY: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1991; George Barna, *User Friendly Churches*, Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1991; Lyle E. Schaller, *The Seven-Day-A-Week Church*, Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1992; and Leith Anderson, *A Church for the 21st Century*, Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House Publishers, 1992.
- [17] Recent publications emphasizing these themes are: Robert Wuthnow, *The Restructuring of American Religion*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988; Nancy T. Ammerman et al. eds., *Studying Congregations: A New Handbook*, Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1998; David A. Roozen and C. Kirk Hadaway, *Church & Denominational Growth*, Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1993; Robert B. Mullin and Russell E. Richey eds., *Reimagining Denominationalism*, New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1994; Norman Shawchuck and Gustave Rath, *Benchmarks of Quality in the Church*, Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1994; and Daniel A. Brown, *The Other Side of Pastoral Ministry*, Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1996.
- [18] The concept of the "next" church was recently popularized by Charles Trueheart, "Welcome To The Next Church," *The Atlantic Monthly*, August, 1996, 37-58.
- [19] While there are many sources addressing this theme, one perspective that is gaining increasing importance discusses the church in relationship to gospel and culture themes. Representative examples of this literature include: Lesslie Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks*, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1986; and Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon, *Resident Aliens*, Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1989.
- [20] This perspective is critical to understand in treating the church. While dated in some ways, the treatment by Hans Kung, *The*

Church, New York, NY: Sheed and Ward, 1967, 3-39, still serves as an excellent introduction to this shift in ecclesiological studies.

[21] Evangelical Lutheran Church in America Study of Theological Education, "Faithful Leaders for a Changing World: Theological Education for Mission in the ELCA," a Report to the 1995 Churchwide Assembly.

[22] The connection between obedience to the great commission and the formation of specialized mission structures to carry out this work is found in William Carey, the father of modern missions, in his seminal treatise, *An Enquiry into the Obligations of Christians to Use Means for the Conversion of the Heathens*, London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1792.

[23] An example of this approach to missions is found in Earl Parvin, *Missions USA*, Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1985.

[24] While there are many evangelism methodologies which have been developed and promoted over the past several decades, the one that has perhaps had the most influence is D. James Kennedy, *Evangelism Explosion*, Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1970. The emphases on personal responsibility, specialized training, and the use of a prescribed methodology are all deeply imbedded in this approach.

[25] Probably the most familiar example of this distinction in missiology circles is found in the decision in 1969 by the Commission on World Mission and Evangelism of the World Council of Churches to change the title of its quarterly journal from *International Review of Missions* to *International Review of Mission*. The dropping of the "s" signaled an important shift in understanding the biblical and theological foundations of God's work in the world through the church.

[26] The recent book by Charles Van Engen, *Mission on the Way*, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1996, 148-156, illustrates this dilemma of treating church and mission as two separate entities. By framing his discussion in these terms, Van Engen tends to set up a dichotomy which is difficult to overcome.

[27] Two recent examples of an effort to achieve a common framework have come out of the Gospel and Our Culture Network movement in North America. These are: George R. Hunsberger and Craig Van Gelder, *The Church Between Gospel and Culture: The Emerging Mission in North America*, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1996; and Darrell L. Guder ed., *Missional Church: A Theological Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America*, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1998.

[28] J. Verkuyl, *Contemporary Missiology: An Introduction*, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1978, 26-88.

[29] As illustrated earlier in Carey, 1792.

[30] A helpful discussion of this development is found in Charles Van Engen, *Mission on the Way*, 17-31. This distinction is also treated by David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991, 15-16.

[31] Bosch, 492-494.

[32] An older, but still quite relevant, introduction to this orientation is Herman Ridderbos, *The Coming of the Kingdom*, Philadelphia, PA: The Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1962.

[33] These include the Vatican II documents, "Dogmatic Constitution on the Church" (*Lumen Gentium*), 1964, and "Decree on the Church's Missionary Activity" (*Ad Gentes*), 1965; in addition to CELAM II, the Second General Conference of Latin American Bishops held at Medellin, Colombia in 1968; and CELAM III, the Third General Conference of Latin American Bishops held at Puebla, Mexico in 1979.

[34] The title of this papal document is "Apostolic Exhortation" (*Evangelii Nuntiandi*), 1975, which was translated into English as "The Evangelization of the Men of Our Time," Washington, D.C.: United States Catholic Conference, 1976.

[35] An important document which developed this perspective was written in anticipation of this merger by Lesslie Newbigin, *One*



Body, *One Gospel, One World*, London & New York: International Missionary Council, 1958.

[36] See especially Johannes Blauw, *The Missionary Nature of the Church*, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1962.

[37] Of special significance is the 1982 publication by the Commission on World Mission and Evangelism of the study, "Mission and Evangelism: An Ecumenical Affirmation," which can be found in *International Review of Mission*, Vol. LXXI, No. 284, Oct. 1982, 427-451.

[38] An example of the growing influence of this perspective can be seen in the consultation convened in Grand Rapids in 1982 by the Theological Working Group of the Lausanne Committee on World Evangelization. This report is "No. 21: Grand Rapids Report--Evangelism and Social Responsibility, An Evangelical Commitment," *Lausanne Occasional Papers*, Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization and World Evangelical Fellowship, 1982.

[39] A summary of these developments is provided by Kevin Giles, *What On Earth Is The Church?*, Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995, 212-229.

[40] An introduction to the Pentecostal perspective on this subject is found in Section I, "Biblical and Theological Dimensions of Global Mission in the Pentecostal Tradition," in Murray A. Dempster et al., *Called & Empowered: Global Mission in Pentecostal Perspective*, Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1991, 1-38.

[41] James A. Scherer, *Gospel, Church & Kingdom: Comparative Studies in World Mission Theology*, Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing House, 1987, p. 84.

[42] This shift is treated at length in Hans Kung, *The Church*; and is also reviewed in Avery Dulles, *Models of the Church*, New York, NY: Image Books--Doubleday, 1974 (1987).

[43] A treatment of this subject is found in Guillermo Cook, *The Expectation of the Poor: Latin American Basic Ecclesial Communities in Protestant Perspective*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1985. See also Leonardo Boff, *Ecclesiology: The Base Communities Reinvent the Church*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1986.

[44] Blauw, *The Missionary Nature of the Church*.

[45] An historical treatment of these developments is found in William Richey Hogg, *Ecumenical Foundations*, New York, NY: Harper & Brothers, 1952.

[46] Giles.

[47] Representative literature from this movement includes Lawrence O. Richards, *A New Face for the Church*, Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1970; David R. Mains, *Full Circle*, Waco, TX: Word Books, 1971; and Gene A. Getz, *Sharpening the Focus of the Church*, Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1974.

[48] A great number of publications have been written by persons working within the church growth movement. Some representative examples include: Donald A. McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1970; Virgil Gerber, *A Manual for Evangelism/Church Growth*, South Pasadena, CA: Wm. Carey Library, 1973; Win Arn ed., *The Pastor's Church Growth Handbook*, Pasadena, CA: Church Growth Press, 1979; Ebbie C. Smith, *Balanced Church Growth*, Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1984; and C. Peter Wagner, *Strategies for Church Growth*, Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1987.

[49] The concept of "organizational effectiveness" comes from the behavioral sciences. This emphasis has gained importance within organizational studies in recent years. While not many church-related authors develop a thorough-going theory of organizational effectiveness, evidences of its influence can be seen running throughout much of the recent literature. See for example: Kennon L. Callahan, *Effective Church Leadership*, New York, NY: Harper and Row, 1990; and Norman Shawchuck and Roger Heuser, *Leading the Congregation*, Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1993.

[50] Guder, *Missional Church*.

[51] Examples of this approach can be found in the recent publications such as: David W. Hall & Joseph H. Hall eds., *Paradigms in Polity*, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1994; and Edmund P. Clowney, *The Church: Contours of Christian Theology*, Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995.

[52] An example of this can be found in Wagner, *Strategies for Church Growth*, 29-32.

[53] A study, which has come to be accepted as a classic, that worked out some of the implications of these various approaches is H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, New York, NY: Harper, 1951.

[54] A good summary of the development and use of this concept in missiological circles is found in Bosch, pp. 420-432. See also Paul G. Hiebert, "Critical Contextualization," in *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, Vol. 11, No. 3, July 1987, 104-112; and Darrell L. Whiteman, "Contextualization: The Theory, the Gap, the Challenge," in *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, Vol. 21, No. 1, January 1997, 2-7. A recent effort to apply this perspective to the formulation of an ecclesiology is Johannes A. van der Ven, *Ecclesiology in Context*, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Co., (1993) 1996.

[55] See Craig Van Gelder, "Missional Challenge: Understanding the Church in North America," in Guder ed., *Missional Church*, 48-60.