

“Lord, I Wish I Were Black.”

Reflections on Gospel Ministry in Antigua

CH3031 Senior Church History – Senior Thesis

Prof. J. Korthals

8 December 2008

Kurt Hagen

The Lord God has, from the earliest times, intended that all nations should come to know him. He earnestly desires their salvation and to that end, he has sent messengers to every corner of the globe. “Then I saw another angel flying in midair, and he had the eternal gospel to proclaim to those who live on the earth – every nation, tribe, language, and people” (Rev 14:6). Every nation and group of people must hear God’s saving message, and this requires messengers.

Many people can attest to the hardships and rewards of proclaiming God’s Word to other nations; among their number is Pastor Larry Zessin, current pastor at St. Peter’s Lutheran Church in Forestville, WI, and former missionary to the island of Antigua. Although he spent only two years in Antigua, he returned with a wealth of stories and experiences, the strong impression that the United States is not the center of the world, and even more importantly, a deeper appreciation for what must not change: God’s eternal truth.

Pastor Zessin accepted the call to be a missionary to Antigua in 1985 and served there for two years. “It was 30° below when we left Wisconsin, and it was 80°-plus when we got there...I thought I’d died and gone to heaven,” he says with a laugh.¹ It was then that he first experienced Antigua’s famously hot and sunny weather. This weather draws many tourists to shop, relax, and play on the beach, while creating extra difficulties for the newly arrived missionary, among others. “You’d go to the store and come back and have to take a nap, because the sun just sucked the life right out of you,” Zessin recalls. “That was a real challenge, trying to figure out how you would get your work done in that hot weather.”

Prior to his being extended a call as a missionary, Zessin served as pastor at St. Paul’s in Menomonee, WI, and as campus pastor at UW Stout, the local college campus. “I think that

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all quotations are from an unpublished interview conducted with Pastor Larry Zessin 9 Nov 2008 by Kurt Hagen.

helped develop my ability to work in a mission field,” Zessin says. “We had a lot of international students, and I would get to know them. They really taught me that everybody isn’t the same as we are in the United States. I enjoyed learning from the students.” Working with college students helped broaden Zessin’s perspectives. They taught him to be more flexible in his ministry and to view his own culture more objectively. They gave him the ability to look from the outside in on the culture he was raised in when he compared their lives and upbringing to his own.

The college students Zessin served helped to lift his eyes to the mission fields of the wider world, but they had been raised there for quite some time already. “When I was younger, I wanted to be a missionary to Africa.” However, this was not to be in his ministry. Zessin muses, “Almost my whole ministry, except for Antigua, was spent in large congregations with multiple pastors.” He points to the gift for preaching that the Lord gave him as one possible reason for this.

When he arrived in Antigua, Pastor Zessin found an immense pastoral task before him. One of the factors which he had to deal with on a daily basis was the crushing poverty. A handful of wealthy expatriates lived on the island in huge mansions, but for the vast majority of the people life was much more of a struggle. Characterizing the poverty of the island’s inhabitants as “extreme,” Zessin goes on to give several examples: “You know those fish shanties you see on the lake in the winter? That’s what their houses were like. Some of the houses had fences on them, and you could knock on them if you wanted to come in; if they didn’t, you’d have to call out, ‘Inside, inside!’ and then they would come out to greet you.” Each village had one pipe for water, which the missionary and his family never drank without filtering it first due to the bacteria in the water. “We had a bucket with filters, and we would pour the water into the bucket so we could drink it.”

Zessin recalls meeting a young boy looking for a handout. “He was wearing sneakers, like Nikes, and I looked closer and saw that he was wearing only the tops of the shoes. They had no soles.” The people didn’t have electric or gas stoves as is common in America. They did their cooking over small charcoal braziers, similar to camp stoves, after first felling the trees, collecting the wood, and burning the charcoal themselves. The government schools on the island had no textbooks, only a blackboard. St. John’s school distinguished itself in part by being the only school on the island with computers. “We had computers, but we didn’t have the Internet,” he explains - mainly due to the fact that the Internet was not as widely used as it is now.

Many of the Antiguan supported themselves by working in the tourist industry. A veritable cottage industry flourished on the beaches, where men and women worked making handicrafts and knickknacks to sell to tourists. As a consequence much of Zessin’s evangelism work took place on the beach, because that’s where the people could be found. Jobs providing services other than tourism-related were also to be had. Maid service could be retained for the princely sum of two dollars a day. Zessin shrugs as he recalls this, half in embarrassment, and goes on to say, “You could have paid them more, but that’s what everybody paid them.” This also illustrates the poverty the people lived in. For some people in the world, minimum wage is indeed minimum.

Zessin’s son Michael, a building contractor by trade, traveled to and from the island for several extended stays. He was unable to find work on the island, not because of a slowdown in construction, but because according to Antiguan law a foreigner could only be granted a work permit if that foreigner’s work could not be done by a native Antiguan. He was not allowed to take an Antiguan’s job as builder and as a consequence returned to the United States.

Sometimes permission to work was withheld to avoid competition. Zessin recalls a group of three doctors from India who came to Antigua to set up a practice. Within seven years of a foreigner's arrival in Antigua, the government reserved the right to ask the foreigner to leave, whatever the reason might be. After six years the three doctors were asked to leave because they were causing too much competition for the inept local medical professionals. The doctors and their families relocated to the neighboring island of St. Lucia, out of reach of the Antiguan government, and Zessin began to travel to St. Lucia to minister to them.² "We started the mission in St. Lucia to serve those doctors, and I believe that it's still there. It's self-supporting today," Zessin says with evident pride in his voice.

The lack of decent medical care was a very real and present hardship. Jamaica Kincaid, in her biting memoir of her native Antigua entitled *A Small Place*, bluntly declares, "The hospital in Antigua is so dirty, so run-down, that even if the best doctors and nurses in the world were employed, a person from another part of the world – Europe or North America – would not feel confident leaving a domestic animal there."³ Zessin confirms the veracity of this assertion with a vivid anecdote: "I remember once I went to visit a woman in the hospital who'd given birth. I went into the ward and she was lying on her bed, and the bed was soaked with blood. She'd delivered her baby in that bed ten, twelve hours ago, and it hadn't been changed. She was still lying there."

Another time one of his daughters came down with "some sort of influenza." She was quite sick, but Zessin explains with joy in his face, "God provided a place for us [to receive medical care] in a beautiful way." The United States Navy had a base on the island, and one of their members put them in touch with a Navy doctor. He gave her an IV of fluids and instructed

² Bitter, David, *WELS Outreach in the Caribbean (on the island of Antigua and beyond)*, WLS church history paper, 1994, pp.9-10.

³ Kincaid, Jamaica, *A Small Place*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1988, p. 65.

the anxious missionary-father how to change it. “I was it for changing that IV. It was either that, or put her on a plane to Puerto Rico.” God preserved them through all their trials in a part of the world that often was lacking in even the basic standards for health care.

Another daily dilemma for Zessin in his ministry in Antigua was the corruption of the government. Jamaica Kincaid, a native Antiguan, sums up the Antiguan government’s record by simply stating, “The government is for sale; anybody from anywhere can come to Antigua and for a sum of money get what he wants.”⁴ Zessin encountered pervasive dishonesty and graft himself on a sadly all-too-frequent basis, and heard a incessant litany of stories about the government’s corruption. “Drug runners were very active and prevalent in the area.” Doubtless this drug activity went hand in hand with the corruption of the government. Kincaid irately alleges as much in her book.⁵

He relates how one of the members of St. John’s had been planning on starting a cable television business on the island. The equipment for the cable television station arrived on the island, but disappeared off the docks as soon as it was unloaded off the ships. Not too long after that, one of the governmental ministers started a cable television business.

Zessin also relates stories of police misconduct and abuse of power. “I knew a young woman who was accused of dealing in the drug trade, but she hadn’t done any of it. The policeman had planted the drugs in her house to get her in trouble. She was arrested.” Another time a family friend was falsely accused: “I remember once my daughter had had some Antiguan friends over. The next day one of the young men was arrested for murder, attacking someone, something like that. We went and told the police that he was with us when the crime occurred, it couldn’t have been him, but they said no, no, they were sure it was him. They asked me to come

⁴ Kincaid, p. 47.

⁵ E.g. Kincaid p.59 *passim*.

in and see if I could pick him out of a lineup. They brought me into a room with a couple over here, some old people over there, and a young man, him [the family friend], in the middle. I said, ‘Yes, that’s him,’ and they finally let him go.” Similar incidents were unfortunately fairly common, whether for the Zessin family personally or for their members on the island.

Not all the abuses were so blatant or so easily corrected. Zessin tells the story of importing a vehicle from the States for the mission’s use: “I had bought a van in Oshkosh and had it shipped down to Antigua for the mission. They charged a duty to let anything into the country, and the duty was 100%. However much you paid for your item, that’s how much you had to pay to bring it in. I went down there to see [the appropriate governmental officials] and they told me what the duty was. They were used to foreigners blowing up, getting mad at them on the spot, but I didn’t do that. I came back nice and gentle the next day, and the next day it was lower, like half that. I went back a few more days and eventually we got it in for maybe 5%, 10% of what we paid for it. But that was the sort of thing you had to deal with.”

The weather, the poverty, and the corruption – there was relatively little that Zessin could do to change these things. But the spiritual state of the people on the island, this he could address – and, as is always the case when dealing with sinful human beings, there was plenty for him to address.

One of the biggest obstacles Zessin faced was the abysmally low level of morality. Bitter notes the “loose moral and spiritual climate in the Caribbean” in his essay *WELS Outreach in the Caribbean*, and describes a “family structure that leaves the unmarried mother in charge of the household and of children as she struggles to raise them by herself.”⁶ Every year Zessin tried to attend the local festivals (known as carnival) as part of his efforts to become part of the community, but confesses, “There were some things I couldn’t go to. I went to what I could,

⁶ Bitter, p.4.

though.” He estimates that 80% of the children on the island were born out of wedlock.

Sometimes mothers with four children came to enroll them at the school, and each child would have a different last name. Marriage was not highly regarded.

People often saw nothing wrong with breaking the Sixth Commandment. “The day we arrived, the congregational president arrived to pick us up at the airport,” Zessin remembers. “He was a really nice guy, good to talk to, very pleasant. He was chief of police in Antigua, so we got through customs right away. A while later I was out making calls and I bumped into his girlfriend. Now, he was married, with children. And he had a girlfriend. Didn’t see anything wrong with it.” Another time Zessin learned an important lesson in pastoral theology while working with the youth group: “I took them camping on the beach, at night. The guys were supposed to be in one tent and the girls in another. I ended up chasing them around all night; I’m going, ‘Oh no, what have I done?’” One suspects that there were considerably fewer nighttime campouts after that sleepless night.

The beaches could also be problematic in the daytime as well. “We had to choose the beaches we went to very carefully. 90% of the beaches were topless, and some were nude. We went to one by accident. I looked around and decided it was fine, so we set up there. My wife was hunting around for sea shells, and I’d noticed some guys come over earlier but hadn’t thought anything of it. I looked over again and noticed that they were naked. I said, ‘Uh, Dee [Dolores, Zessin’s wife], maybe we should get going?’ ‘Not now, I’m busy!’ ‘No, I think we should go’ – and all of a sudden she looked up and got it. We took off pretty soon after that.” St. Paul’s command to young Timothy to “flee immorality” is usually interpreted figuratively, but in this instance the literal sense was the more useful.

This incident was somewhat comical; this was not always the case. Even after twenty years the pain is palpable in his voice as Zessin says, “Girls got pregnant, and that was the end of their life.” He pauses and stares off into the distance for a moment, then continues, “They couldn’t go to school anymore, and without an education, they couldn’t get off the island.” Thus the cycle perpetuated itself across the generations. Zessin saw firsthand the “struggles” of unmarried mothers referenced by Bitter earlier, and his heart went out to them in their distress. To counteract this climate of license, and to possibly prevent future suffering of the harsh consequences of these sins, Zessin needed to preach consistent, stern law. This remained a thorny issue the entire time he was at St. John’s.

Another spiritual issue that Zessin dealt was one that many pastors in the mainland United States do not necessarily deal with on a daily basis: witchcraft and the occult. A large portion of Antigua’s population is descended from slaves brought by various colonial overlords to work on the island. These slaves brought their tribal practices, customs, and superstitions with them from Africa. These animistic, superstitious beliefs and practices mutated and crossed with Catholicism to produce voodoo.⁷ In Antigua, Zessin explains, this religion is known as *jumbe*.

Zessin characterizes the spirit world as being “very close to the surface” in Antigua. Part of the reason for this is the spiritual heritage of the islanders’ ancestors. Slavery was only a few generations removed for many of them – it was not uncommon for people to have had grandparents who were slaves. With such a recent and strong connection to the beliefs of their forebears, it is not surprising that many people believed in the spirit world and attempted to contact or control it.

⁷ Corbett, Bob. “Introduction to Voodoo in Haiti.” March 1998. Webster University. Accessed 7 Dec 2008. <<http://www.webster.edu/~corbetre/haiti/voodoo/overview.htm>>

Zessin gives another reason for the prevalence of black magic and sorcery in Antigua: “The people had rejected Christ so long.” This is an example of what the Apostle Paul expounds in Romans 1:23, 25: “[They] exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles... They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshipped and served created things rather than the Creator – who is forever praised...” (It is interesting to note that immediately following this verse, Paul links the sexual immorality of those who worship in this way to their ungodly worship – just as many of the Antiguan people plunged into a flood of sexual immorality without a second thought.) One must also bear in mind Paul’s warning that “the sacrifices of pagans are offered to demons” who are only too happy to accept such worship (I Cor 10:20). Because many of the Antiguan people did not worship the true God or his Son – or had never heard of him in the first place – worship of created things and of spirits and demons took God’s rightful place. Zessin spoke of people seeing the spirits walking around, and of their interactions with the world of men – noises, voices, objects moved – as being almost commonplace. In such a climate, one permissive or accepting toward the influence of spirits, is it any wonder that Satan and his demons took advantage of the opportunities presented them?

His calling as shepherd often led Zessin into uncharted ministerial waters in regard to the spirit world. A woman once approached him and asked him to do an exorcism for her house. She was being disturbed by evil spirits rattling her dishes and speaking, and she wanted them driven away. After he recovered from his shock (“They don’t teach you that course at the seminary!”), Zessin began searching through his Bible to discover how Jesus dealt with evil spirits. Following repeated study of the Scriptures, he concluded that the Word of God was required to restore

peace. In the certainty born of experience, he says simply, “The sword of the Spirit is the Word of God.” With this sword he would drive the roaring lion from God’s flock.

Zessin entered the woman’s house carrying his open Bible. In a loud voice he declared, “This is a good, God-fearing house. In the name of Jesus Christ, I command you to leave!” He proceeded through each room of the house, saying the same thing in each – save one. In the bathroom he announced, “Satan, you may stay here if you wish.” The sword of the Spirit did its work unfailingly according to the Lord’s promise and Zessin is happy to report that the woman was not troubled again.

These encounters with the spirit world were not always negative. Zessin reports an incident that raised many a goose bump on the arms of impressionable young children at the Lutheran summer camp of which he was director in later years. He would answer requests for a ghost story by saying, “I won’t tell you a ghost story, but this story is true.” (The author was just one such impressionable child.) The story is as follows.

Zessin’s wife Dolores and older daughter Natalie were gone across the island visiting friends, and Zessin was home with his youngest daughter, Beth. “I woke up one night to hear Beth screaming from down the hall. I went into her room and she was sitting on the edge of her bed. I asked her, ‘Beth, what’s wrong?’ She said, ‘A black man was just in here, Daddy.’ We had a deadbolt on the back door that could only be opened with a key, to prevent someone from reaching around from the outside and opening it. I went and checked it. The women must have forgotten to flip the key when they left and it was unlocked. As I came back through the kitchen I noticed a butcher knife laying on the kitchen table.

“I went back in by Beth and asked her what had happened. She said, ‘I was asleep and I heard someone call my name – *Beth, Beth*. I woke up and saw the black man and I screamed.’

Now, Antiguan can't pronounce the *th* sound. It comes out as a hard *t* – *Bet, Bet* is what they would say. To this day I am convinced that it was an angel that said her name and woke her up. He could have gotten in here and done who knows what – rape, murder, what have you. I believe it was an angel sent from God that woke her up and protected her.” One need scarcely imagine the impact that such a story would have on young boys.

Openness to the spirit world need not be wholly negative; it also allows God to act more openly to protect his own. “The salvation of the righteous comes from the Lord; he is their stronghold in time of trouble. The Lord helps them and delivers them; he delivers them from the wicked and saves them, because they take refuge in him” (Ps 37:39-40). Angels do exist and they serve to keep God’s people safe. They truly are “ministering spirits sent to serve those who will inherit salvation” (Heb 1:14).

Not all of Pastor Zessin’s missionary work was so dramatic. Much of it was the hard work common to shepherds of God’s flock everywhere – reaching out to those in need of the gospel, bringing back the straying, preaching, teaching, and leading worship.

Zessin had to modify his preaching as he became more familiar with the Antiguan mindset. Since Zessin is someone who values humor and employs it frequently in sermons and teaching as well as in everyday conversation, he had to fine-tune his jokes in order to mesh with the Antiguan sense of humor. As an illustration, he tells a joke which involves a dog being gobbled up by a disguised alligator (don’t ask.) The North American laughs at the end, at the punch line; the Antiguan laughs before then, at the dog being gobbled up. “Their sense of humor is more slapstick,” Zessin says.

He also used what was familiar to his audience in the course of preaching. “I often would refer to the foods that they knew, like the potatoes or whatever it was. If I mentioned cherries, for

instance, they would have had no idea what I was talking about.” This is a sound principle of education and of preaching, and Zessin wisely adapted to the requirements of his hearers in this regard.

Zessin’s preaching was perhaps more notable for what did not change as for what did change: “It was still law-gospel preaching.” The sturdy Scriptural dynamic of killing law and cleansing gospel still did the Spirit’s work across cultures, regardless of the minister or the congregation. Zessin well noted its effects by saying simply, “They accepted it.” This echoes Paul’s praise for the Thessalonians in 1 Thess 2:13 when he says, “And we also thank God continually because, when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but as it actually is, the word of God, which is at work in you who believe.” This acceptance can only be worked by God, whether in Antigua, Thessalonian, or American, and is evidence of the Spirit’s saving work.

Worship services at St. John’s were something of a hybrid. “We used the same liturgy [as did other WELS congregations in the United States], but with more upbeat music. They really loved to sing. You’d just start to hum a song and they’d start to move a little; they just seemed to have a knack for it. You’d give them a hymn to sing and they would sing it out. They’d start to hum along when the organ was introducing the hymn. Sometimes they’d even start singing right away, before it was time to come in. We always joked that if there was a rebellion we would just put a record on the record player and then make our escape when they started dancing. They were very musical people.” Since Zessin’s tenure in Antigua, students have formed a children’s choir as well as a steel pan group that often plays for worship services.⁸

⁸ Meyer, David. *A WELS Anomaly in its Worldwide Mission Field: St. John's Lutheran School in Antigua*. WLS Church History paper, 2004, p.9.

Apart from worship services, Zessin of course also did evangelism. This included walking the beaches and talking with those he met. Zessin would also go into the villages. Many times his approach was simply to start knocking on doors (or fences), and he would use anything at hand and any opportunity to build bridges for the gospel.

Zessin describes one such method. “I would take a sheet of paper and fold it like this” – making a paper airplane with stubby wings. “Then I’d tell the person, ‘This airplane doesn’t fly very well. You try and throw it far, it comes down. You throw it hard, it comes down.’” He illustrates with a few tosses. He continues, “I’d say, ‘My mother told me that people who don’t have Jesus in their life are like this paper airplane. You can’t fly -’” – here he begins to rip the wings off the airplane, much to the surprise of the person he’s conversing with – “but if you trust in the guy who died on that cross, Jesus Christ” – he unfolds the wingless paper airplane to reveal a paper cross with neatly torn edges – “you’ll live forever.’ Then I would give them the paper cross to take home. Or I would go into the villages and make them a paper cup – very few of the people had cups, most of the people just put their mouth down to the water or drank out of a jug or something – and then they’d get a drink of water out of the paper cup and we would talk about the water of life.” In this way he strove to use whatever was at hand to make the gospel clear and relatable to his audience.

Another fruitful location for ministry was, of all places, waiting in line at the bank. “There was no drive-through or drive-up teller – there were hardly any cars, it was an island – and so you spent a lot of time waiting in these long lines at the bank. You’d strike up a conversation with the person next to you – ‘Where do you live?’, ‘Oh, over by St. John’s,’ ‘Hey, isn’t that the church on the hill?’, ‘Why yes, it is. I’m the pastor. Why don’t you come down to

see us one of these days.’” In this way, by hook or by crook, Pastor Zessin sought to win those he came into contact with to Christ.

His anecdote about waiting in line at the bank also highlights his philosophy of ministry while in Antigua. St. John’s, and by extension their pastor, was more a part of the community than perhaps many churches in the mainland United States. “That’s what I really strove for. We weren’t there just for our own people; the whole island was kind of my congregation.” Zessin understood very well that he was reaching out with the gospel to everyone he came into contact with, that he was not sent only to the sheep of St. John’s.

To that end, shortly after he arrived he deputized a young boy to orient him to his new home. “I said to him, ‘I’m going to adopt you and you’re going to take me around and show me the way things really are.’ And he did. He showed me a lot. He would tell me, ‘You don’t want to go there,’ or ‘Don’t bother going over there’ or ‘Don’t talk to them.’ He really helped me figure out what was going on.”

Zessin began to make use of this newfound knowledge in short order. “We had one of our first meetings at the church since I’d arrived, and the church council told me they were releasing a whole bunch of people – twenty, maybe thirty. I asked if anybody had gone to talk to them. No, they said, we’re just letting them go.” After further conciliatory discussion, Zessin got them to postpone releasing the lapsed members and set about calling them back, with a fair degree of success. This process, and the heart behind it, is common to many a pastor seeking to keep the body of Christ together – whether it be in Antigua or Algoma, Timbuktu or Two Rivers.

His involvement in the community also extended to St. John’s school. “We had a very high-quality school. We got to the families through their children. We had Europeans come to our school too, people from all over the world...I was just around the school a lot. I was there for

confirmation classes, but I was just around a lot.” The children at the school got to know Pastor Zessin quite well, due to his well-known sense of humor, and their parents also came to know and trust him. St. John’s received a steady stream of adult confirmations and new members who first came into contact with the church through the school. This happened before Zessin’s time and continued after he left.

Zessin’s unique position as pastor of an island moreso than just a congregation not only changed his relation to the wider world around him, it also altered the lives of his family. They did not join him all at once. Natalie, his oldest daughter, joined him first. She knew Spanish and was able to pitch in with mission work and teaching. “She had just graduated from college and was working in Washington at a national park. I asked her if she wanted to come down by me, and she said sure.” His other two children came at different times, depending on when they were confirmed and finished high school. “I was able to make it back for each confirmation and graduation. It was hard, but I made it.” Beth, his youngest, attended the synodical prep school in Prairie du Chien. “She was able to come for Christmases and summers. Those were the only times the synod would pick up the tab.” Michael, their middle child, came and went for several stays, as previously mentioned.

It is clear in speaking to Zessin that he is a family man. Speaking from experience, he says frankly, “I really appreciate the missionaries who leave their families – that’s got to be the hardest part of all.” The sheer distance separating him from the rest of his family was difficult to deal with. “When you’ve grown up with all your parents and brothers and sisters and aunts and uncles and cousins all around you, it’s hard to give that up.” One misses so much in the mundane events of life by being removed to a Caribbean island.

The distance also made ordinarily traumatic events even harder to take. “My wife’s mother and father both died while we were over there. I still remember my father-in-law – after his wife, my mother-in-law, died, saying to me, ‘Larry, please come back. Please come back. I’ll find you a job, I’ll help, just please come back.’ He didn’t have anybody, see.” Zessin pauses for a moment before resuming, “About six weeks after that he had a stroke and that’s when he laid in his bed for two days before anybody found him. Not too long after that he died.” Even with the sure hope of the resurrection, the Christian often weeps, as indeed his Lord did before the grave of Lazarus. Missionary work often necessitates sacrifices that many would consider above and beyond, but missionaries understand that, as Zessin says, “It’s very hard to be separated from family, or [to be a missionary] if you have young children, but the rewards are great.”

One of the immediate rewards of their way of life was an increased sense of togetherness and more time spent together. “It was easier to balance family and ministry, because we did everything together,” Zessin recalls. “It was an island, we had nowhere else to go.” The family would often participate in activities such as scuba diving together. The children would help teach the younger Antiguan students or accompany Pastor on visits around the island. In a foreign land, the family altar became more precious. “We always tried to have family devotions with our children when they were young, and I think they still do...at least they should if they don’t.” Even though they were separated from their extended family, Zessin’s family grew closer together during their shared adventures in Antigua.

Zessin was driven by a passion to know his Antiguan neighbors through and through. “I became as close to them as possible, to understand them.” This extended even to his choice of diet. He ate what the Antiguanians did. A vegetable named cristophine (somewhat like a squash) received high praise when chopped and sautéed with a little butter and salt. Another tasty dish

was a pineapple cut into quarters. The core was removed and a sauce made from shrimp, milk, and a variety of other ingredients was spooned into its place, then the pineapple was reassembled and served. And then there was the baking. “I don’t know why their bread was so good – maybe they used different flour or something.” Zessin fondly recalls the smell of baking bread wafting on the warm breezes as he walked past the villages. “Whenever we’d have visitors, we’d always go and get some of that good bread for them.”

It was after about a year there that Zessin found himself praying, “Lord, I wish I were black.” What a striking prayer, that he would ask the Lord to change the color of his skin! That’s something the Scripture refers to as being as difficult as the leopard changing his spots (Jer 13:23). What would motivate a pastor to ask this of God?

If he were black, he would be able to reach them better and connect with the people in order to share Christ with them. “I was always the white missionary, and yeah, they would listen to me and they respected me. But it wasn’t the same as one of their own, a black person, telling them,” Zessin says. This prayer is poignant in the intensity of his desire to communicate the eternal good news of Jesus Christ to those who were his brothers and sisters in faith, if not in race. That desire laid hold of and shaped his every word and action so that by all possible means he might save some, as Paul declares (I Cor 9:22.) No detail was too small, no situation too stressful, for Zessin to attempt to display Christ in the midst of it. This was always his burning aim and goal. Nothing was more vital than that.

The prayer that forms the title of this paper is poignant for another reason: the recognition of how very different the missionary was from his flock, and perhaps the frustration that accompanied this recognition. He understood that try as he might, there were most likely going to be differences between them that no time or circumstances would be able to change. Their

respective upbringings were just too different, and however much he may have wished it were not so, he had to own up to that fact sooner or later. Perhaps his prayer recognizes that even as he begs God to annul it. Yet Zessin himself would be the first to confess that the gospel gives common ground beyond that which man can manufacture, and often makes brothers and sisters where only enemies and strangers existed before. He would – and does - testify that it already has, in bringing us sinners to Christ.

A living faith in this gospel and an ever-present consciousness of it is the daily bread of the under-shepherd of God. This faith and consciousness is nourished by a faithful devotional life. When asked, Zessin immediately replied in the affirmative: “Your personal devotional life is very important. [In a place like Antigua] you can’t just jump in the car and go and talk to somebody if you need guidance. It comes down to being in the Word; that’s the only place you find the strength. I’m talking apart from preparing sermons and Bible classes. You have to be in the Word on your own, personally.” Without the personal connection with God’s Word that an active devotional life brings, the pastor risks a merely professional use of the Word, or else disregarding its message for himself – at his peril.

Zessin spoke of seeing how Paul and other missionaries in Scripture dealt with different situations they faced. This witness of Scripture is comforting as well as instructive. “You know that they’ve been there before.” The present-day missionary begins to draw parallels between himself and the apostle Paul, and to derive encouragement and comfort from the record of God’s mighty faithfulness to Paul in all the vicissitudes of ministry in far-off lands.

The strength that God’s Word provides is just as necessary now as it was when he served in Antigua, and just as important in the United States as it is in a foreign land, Zessin maintains. As one of the many reasons to maintain a healthy devotional life, he says plainly, “You need it.

There are so many more temptations, demands on our time – and it’s increased as the world has gotten worse.” This is a common refrain among experienced pastors, and it does little to encourage those youngsters who aspire to be pastors one day. (Luckily, they don’t grasp the true scope of such statements and plunge ahead in their preparations for ministry.) Zessin continues with a twinkle in his eye, “I used to go fishing all the time. Now I don’t think I’ve been fishing in months –and I guess it’s true what they say, if you’re too busy to go fishing you must be too busy.” Too busy to go fishing, one might add, but never too busy to take time with God’s Word, vital to Christian life and ministry as it is.

Two constant threads run through Zessin’s conversations. One is the gospel of Jesus Christ. The other is his love for God’s people – in this case, the Antiguan people. The phrase that serves as the title for this paper – “Lord, I wish I were black” – encapsules both strains that occupied Zessin’s mind and soul as a missionary to Antigua, and they still shape and direct him today. He is, by God’s grace, a shepherd and a pastor, in every sense of those words.

When speaking with him about his service in Antigua, one does not hear first about shoddy hospitals or corrupt officials, baking hot weather or exile from family members Stateside; one hears about the Antiguan people: “They are kind people. They’re very loving, moreso than here. The people really loved you – not just because you were their shepherd, they loved you. They were so uninhibited. You didn’t have to wonder if they were happy, they would just jump up and down. My only regret about my time there is that it didn’t last longer.”

“You know,” he continues, fixing you with a kindly yet intent gaze, “there are so many rewards in sharing Christ with people who are going to hell, and then all of a sudden you can see a glow in their face; there’s something there – they know their Lord. That you can be a part of that, there’s no way to put that into words.”

Works Cited

- Bitter, David. *WELS Outreach in the Caribbean (on the island of Antigua and beyond)*. WLS Church History paper, 1994.
- Corbett, Bob. "Introduction to Voodoo in Haiti." March 1998. Webster University. Accessed 7 Dec 2008. <<http://www.webster.edu/~corbetre/haiti/voodoo/overview.htm>>.
- Kincaid, Jamaica, *A Small Place*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Girroux, 1988.
- Meyer, David. *A WELS Anomaly in its Worldwide Mission Field: St. John's Lutheran School in Antigua*. WLS Church History paper, 2004.
- Zessin, Larry. Interview with Kurt Hagen. Conducted 9 Nov 2008 for WLS Church History paper, 8 Dec 2008.