

EQUIPPING THE BELIEVERS FOR EVANGELISM

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The biblical paradigm of Christian warfare serves to underscore the reason for this essay and to outline the content of this essay.

The church in America, spared frontal assault, has been sapped by Satan's guerrilla warfare. Decades of doctrinal subversion have made the church defensive, reactionary. Theological fire-fights obscured the mission of liberating hostages of unbelief. In fact, that mission became a causality of doctrinal demise as both subtle and overt universalism infected church members. Secular humanism has eroded much of the spiritual will in members, while materialism and sensualism eroded their "light" and "salt." Symptoms of this, such as backdoor losses and declining stewardship have too often been met by programs of institutional self-preservation. Even evangelism has been viewed by members as an institutional cure. The far-reaching effects of secularism in American society have re-inforced an already existing isolationism in the church. The lost are viewed as the enemy instead of victims of the enemy and objects of outreach. A widening gap in philosophy of life threatens to make the church an island of irrelevance in society. Christian education takes on the purpose of inoculation against infectious evil rather than that of equipping warriors. The religious sects and cults, nurtured like parasites on the impotence of American Christendom, have become an excuse for evangelistic indolence among Christians who don't want to be associated with their aggressive proselytizing. Further excuse can be found in the manipulative methodology of pseudo-evangelists growing like pox on the body of the church.

The Christian Church, both in America and in the world, has lost huge chunks of statistical ground during this century. Each soul on that statistical score-card is a reason Christ died, a reason for his Great Commission. Unless the church recovers from its siege mentality and regains its mission initiative, Satan will continue to lead people out the church's back door while barricading its front door. Nothing short of full-scale mobilization for mission will do—the mission of making disciples by outreach and nurture.

The imagery of Christian warfare provides an outline for the subject: "Equipping the Believers for Evangelism." First, we must understand that God equips believers for evangelism. Recall St. Paul's "Armor of God" illustration in Ephesians 6 or his words in 2 Corinthians 10: "The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds." To reduce evangelism to pragmatic methodology and sociological strategy would be to lay down our weapons, the Word and the Spirit. In our soldiering analogy, God has recruited believers, motivated them and equipped them with every necessary weapon for the battle of evangelism.

Secondly, the Church equips believers for evangelism. As the Body of Christ, the Church is the coordination of spiritual gifts God has given in the people he calls to mission. It is the structure of mutual encouragement, admonition and support each witness needs. As a ministry entrusted by Christ with the "keys," the Church applies the means of grace to build up the believers in their life of faith and witness. As Christ's visible presence in the world, the Church is itself a witness of love and truth inviting the lost. As a people "transformed by the renewing of their minds" (Romans 12:2), the Church applies sanctified social science to its mission, subject

always to the Word of God. In our military metaphor, the Church trains believers in the use of their spiritual weapons, organizes them for effective service and develops strategies for action.

Finally, believers equip themselves for evangelism. As a “royal priesthood ...to declare the praises of him who has called (them) out of darkness into his wonderful light” (1 Peter 2:9), they draw directly on the power of God for their task and carry on the personal ministry of witness each Christian has. As dedicated disciples they practice the spiritual regimen that prepares them to “endure hardship like a good soldier of Christ Jesus.” (2 Timothy 2:3) In the paradigm of Christian warfare, believers prepare themselves by disciplined training and learn by faithful doing, practice and experience.

Before developing the subject of “equipping” however, we should define *evangelism*. The noun “evangelism” doesn’t occur in Scripture, perhaps because God wanted his church to do his mission, not debate it. Our English word is the transliteration of a verb meaning “to bring or announce good news.” The noun “evangel” or “gospel” is used with a verb meaning “to preach or proclaim as a herald” with the same force of mission. More than fifty times in the New Testament such “evangelizing” verbs are used. Closely related are a family of nouns and verbs meaning “witness” or “testify,” with the English derivative “martyr” an indication of the commitment implied. While “to evangelize” and “to witness” may be interchangeable expressions for the church’s mission, “evangelism” emphasizes the objective and public proclamation of the gospel and “witnessing” emphasizes the personal testimony of believers to the saving truth.

In its broad sense, evangelism encompasses the entire mission and ministry of the Church, outreach to the lost with the Gospel and nurturing of the saved by the Gospel. Hence, our seminary’s chancel has the superscription in Greek: “Preach the Gospel!” This broad use of the term “evangelism” reminds us that outreach and nurture with the gospel are not two disparate types of ministry, as though there were “mission congregations and maintenance congregations.” Gospel nurturing is to equip believers for ministry both within and outside the church. We nurture for mission. And outreach with the Gospel has the intent of bringing people under the nurturing ministry of the church. Matthew 28:18-20 and Ephesians 4: 11 - 15 demonstrate this theological linkage. In fact, since the Church has a “Great (Com-)Mission,” spiritual gifts such as those listed in Romans 12 should not be arbitrarily separated into categories of “nurture” and “outreach.” Such gifts as “prophesying, serving, teaching, encouraging, giving, leadership and showing mercy” (Romans 12:6-8) are given by the Spirit for the entire mission/ministry of the Church. God didn’t intend “evangelism” in its narrow sense to be a ministry of only a few “specialists” who have the gift of “evangelist.”

In its narrow and common meaning, evangelism is bringing the gospel to those whom mission counselor Robert Hartman identifies as the un-Churched and the un-churched (non-Christians and those who are not under the active nurturing of a Christian ministry). At the risk of adding to an already confusing list of definitions let me be more specific about the “narrow” mission for which we equip believers. *Evangelism is everything that Christians, individually and corporately, do to confront the lost with law and gospel so that by the Gospel the Holy Spirit would bring them to faith in Jesus Christ and make them disciples.*

There are reasons for such a definition. While strictly speaking evangelism is proclaiming the gospel, the example of Jesus and the apostles teaches the importance of the law in convincing the lost with their sin and their need for the Savior. Jesus says that the Holy Spirit “will convict the world of guilt in regard to sin and righteousness and judgment.” (John 16:8) Especially in contemporary society must we skillfully use the law if the gospel is to have an

audience. At the same time, orthodox evangelism must adhere to the truth that the Holy Spirit alone works faith; and he does so alone by the gospel. (1 Corinthians 12:3, Romans 1:16. et al.)

Further, while Scripture uses “Seed scattering” as an illustration for proclaiming the gospel, the mission emphasis is on “harvesting.” What lies between these two actions is a lot of cultivating and watering. To merely speak the gospel, without a passionate concern that people really hear and understand it, is less than faithful evangelism. To separate the act of gospel proclamation from the will of God that people are made disciples risks exaggerating the tragedy Jesus described in the parable of the Sower and the Seed. Evangelism should be the process of applying the gospel as often and in as many ways as possible and as necessary, so that the Spirit’s work of conversion is accomplished and the Savior’s will that “other sheep” become part of the “one flock” is realized. In just such passion for the salvation of the lost, St. Paul wrote “I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some.” (1 Corinthians 9:22) St. Luke in Acts verifies what Paul says in 2 Corinthians 5:11, “Since we know what it is to fear the Lord, we try to persuade men.”

Finally, we must affirm that evangelism is the ministry of every believer and of every church. While the ascended Lord has given “some to be evangelists” (just as he gave some to be pastors and teachers in Ephesians 4:11), he did so “for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry.” (the New King James Version) Every Christian must take to heart Jesus’ parting words, “You will be my witnesses . . . to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8) and thus, “Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for or the hope that you have.” (1 Peter 3:15) With differing gifts and at differing points in spiritual maturity, believers will witness one truth in many ways; but they will witness in the Savior’s strategy for global evangelism. Together, with the variety of the Spirit’s gifts and growing toward spiritual maturity, Christians as “Church” have a public ministry of evangelism. Some will engage “strangers” in sin-and-grace dialog as evangelists so that the Spirit will make them “friends.” Some will use their gifts in a ministry of welcome and assimilation. Some will participate in the countless ways there are of locating lost “prospects” and building “bridges” of witness to them. Some will use their gift of administration to assure that efficient use of all possible resources results in effective follow-through, so that law and gospel will be heard and read repeatedly by the lost. Some will work on programs of ministry that gain the attention of the lost at their level of felt need and satisfy with Scripture their real need. All pray; all testify; all serve; all give.

Perhaps our “narrow” definition of evangelism has broadened, once more approaching the broad definition. And so it should; for evangelism is not a narrow “program” in Christ’s Church; it is the mission of Christ’s Church.

I

1. God Equips The Believers For Evangelism

I doubt that an essay such as this was ever assigned for a first-century convention of the church at Jerusalem. No evangelism “program” (at least by contemporary definition) is discernible in the New Testament or early church historians. That St. Paul had a broad-strokes strategy is apparent. He typically approached the Jews first, for their Old Testament provided the easiest evangelism approach and an audience most likely to listen. But when the apostle turned to the gentile community, his “methodology” accommodated the audience and opportunity without in any way compromising the message. The church in Jerusalem first centered its strategy in public preaching and teaching at the temple mount. But persecution encouraged the church to adapt. Scattered members witnessed wherever they were led; and the mother church sent apostles to follow up and instruct. Evangelists such as Philip became “church planters.”

Peter's encounter with the Lord and with Cornelius broadened the Church's outreach strategy. A thriving daughter congregation in Antioch was led by the Lord to issue a "foreign mission" call. All of this was simply the logical extension of the Savior's parting instructions to "Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation" (Mark 16:15), to "be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." (Acts 1:8) Christians became witnesses at their rebirth. They became more proficient in evangelism as they matured spiritually, discovered their spiritual gifts and DID evangelism. The love of Christ compelled them. (2 Corinthians 5:14) The will of Christ directed them. Compassion for the lost gave them urgency. Conviction gave them boldness. Grateful faith made them available. The joy of salvation and the love they lived out in their fellowship attracted an audience. The message was also the mission and the motivation.

The letters to the seven churches of Revelation and the evidence of church history suggest that the spontaneous evangelism of first-generation Christendom began to break down in second and third generation churches, then slowed with the "institutionalizing" of the church. Heresy and controversy deflected energy and attention from outreach; and the church has continued an unfortunate polarity between "theologians" and "evangelists." (leaving ecclesiastical "bureaucrats" to moderate?) Freedom from persecution exposed the church to secularization, and "nominalism" became an entrenched evil. ("Hypocrite" is not a modern epithet hurled at the church.) A "comfortable" church found "convenient" ways of practicing religion, disturbed only by a few zealots or "crusaders" who wanted to refocus the church's mission.

The same phenomenon in microcosm can be demonstrated in the lives of contemporary Christians. The six-year-old who speaks to anyone about her Savior, without inhibition and with ingenuous conviction, becomes a close-mouthed adolescent conforming to the pressure of peers and the example of adult church members. The adult convert who zealously witnesses to unchurched friends and relatives slowly loses both audience and energy for witness.

The point is that God equips believers for evangelism. Too often the church seems to blunt that mission zeal. Identifying and removing the barriers to the "natural" witness inspired by God should be the first focus of the church in equipping believers for evangelism. God re-creates missionaries when He regenerates people. He gives them the message of evangelism at the same time that he converts and confirms with that Gospel. He sends them the Holy Spirit, who equips and emboldens them for witness at the same time he builds them to maturity and produces the Christian character traits that invite others to ask them for the "reason for their hope." He invests in them spiritual gifts for ministry, both nurture of the saints and outreach to the lost. But where God equips believers for evangelism, Satan, world and sinful nature erect barriers to evangelism. Let's identify some of those barriers.

GUILT is an inhibition masquerading as motivation. Because of guilt our failures to witness and "failures" in witnessing become barriers to subsequent witness effort. People tend to avoid what makes them feel guilty or inadequate. Not only will this fact of human psychology explain why Christians don't share their faith, but it explains also why they will find fault with aggressive outreach efforts in their church which might expose their guilt-driven fears. Further, if your "religion" makes you feel bad about yourself, you won't likely feel good about sharing it. People are perfectly capable of laying this "evangelism guilt trip" on themselves, but the church frequently - though unwittingly - contributes to the frustration. Sermons that emphasize personal witness responsibility without opportunities for training and support, without example or sensitivity to people's inhibitions, can create an effect quite the opposite of that intended. We

need to clarify what Christian witness is and is not to avoid mistaken notions of “failure.” We need to be honest about “results” and about the difficulty there is in confessing Christ in a non-Christian age. Perhaps we have assumed too much when we urge evangelism. Above all, we must be sure that the gospel is applied to sins of omission as well as commission, that our members fully appropriate the freedom from guilt that the gospel means. It is no coincidence that in the penitential Psalm 51, David says: “Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me. THEN I will teach transgressors your ways and sinners will be converted unto you.”

There are other FEARS that inhibit witness. One group has to do with the anticipation of rejection, for example, “People will think I’m weird.” (Why don’t we anticipate Spirit-worked acceptance, I wonder?) Another category of fears has to do with inadequacy. “I wouldn’t know what to say.” “I’m afraid I’ll say something wrong.” (If people are damned without Christ, how can we make their situation worse by what we may say?) “What if someone asks a question I can’t answer?” Then there is the unspoken fear: “What happens when they find out what I’m really like?” Such fears are understandable. To speak sin and grace to another person is to assume some measure of responsibility for that person. To give personal witness is self-disclosure at the edge of self-exposure. Such fears make people defensive about their faith, resulting in a parody like: “You wouldn’t want to know about a Savior who loves you and everlasting joy, would you?” Fear makes people talk about “religion” or “church” instead of Christianity and Jesus; and sooner or later you just know someone will ask about scouting and close communion. It may even be fear that leads people to confuse moralizing for witnessing, as though telling people to “watch their mouth” were evangelism. We need to honestly confront fears and expose their source self-centeredness, Satanic subterfuge and plain, old spiritual immaturity. We can focus a fear big enough to overcome the little fears - the fear that Christ’s return will mean the condemnation of people he put into our path in life. More important, we need to fix evangelism on positives, like the promises and presence of the Savior, the power of the gospel, the joy of witnessing. Share the “success stories” God works; there are too many “horror stories” about what didn’t work. And if God could accommodate Moses’ fears by giving him Aaron as a spokesman, we might try similar pairing (evangelists, pastor or articulate member with a retiring personality who has built a “relational bridge” for witness to a friend). Once Moses had Aaron for security, he never needed Aaron.

Christians today seem to suffer- from an “IDENTITY CRISIS.” They forget *whose* they are and, therefore, *who* they are. Caught up in the world they are too much OF, they emit little light. Not surprisingly, they suffer many of the same “self-worth” or “self-image” problems that people of the world face. That, in turn, means they have little to share on a level the lost can relate to. They go around trying to “find” themselves because they’ve neglected the one who found them. Before they can witness, they need to re-discover what Jesus has done to adopt them into his Father’s family, what Jesus did to fix their worth at the cross, what Jesus said to give them purpose and significance as his ambassadors. (2 Corinthians 5: 11-21) Christians today need to abandon the “cheap grace, cheap discipleship” caricature of Christianity and seriously organize their lives around who they are in Christ and why they’re here. The church must avoid fostering “convenient Christianity” as a concession to society. Not legalism, but love teaches the claims of Christ on his disciples and the privilege of mission. The church must focus that mission, a mission easily obscured by the traditions and patterns of “going to church” and “doing church work.” The church must develop a practice of lay ministry to make its theology of church and ministry functional. And the church must apply the truths of redemption, reconciliation and

regeneration to the persons in the pew, so that they see themselves through the cross instead of in the mirror of the world.

Someone has coined two words that express another barrier to God-equipped witnesses witnessing: *xenophobia* and *koinonitis*. “All dressed up and nowhere to go” might characterize fully equipped soldiers of the cross who never venture out of the church. Xenophobia, literally “fear of strangers,” describes what happens when the church withdraws too far out of the world. It means that Christians have no relationships with the unchurched, no understanding of them and, finally, no interest in them. It’s a perfectly natural phenomenon, for Christians will want to fellowship with other Christians. It can be exaggerated by “koinonitis,” Christian fellowship that becomes a closed, exclusive circle.

Healthy programs of ministry such as Lutheran schools can have a negative side effect if they encourage isolationism. Well-meaning members can discourage unchurched visitors with attitudes that suggest “acceptance” in our midst must be earned. Too often the practice and traditions that develop in the church are a gauntlet for the unchurched. And all this is unintentional. We just don’t think of those outside the church when we plan and vote and do what we do inside the church. If our mission to the lost is not integral to our ministry, that is communicated subtly to members and “outsiders” alike. Xenophobia ultimately means suspicion of the outsider, even antipathy toward non-Christians. Our distance from them means “we don’t know where to start” in trying to reach them with the gospel.

A final barrier to evangelism the church must identify and overcome may be captured by the word INSTITUTIONALISM. In the strict sense that word describes the canonizing of forms, structures and traditions which render the church inflexible and unresponsive to people. Means become ends. The church becomes reactionary, responding critically to change and longing for the “good old days” rather than planning for the future with initiative. Finances and property become a pre-occupation; and problem-solving becomes a way of life. The noble objective of preserving the truth is too easily confused with the less lofty goal of preserving a tradition or the “institution” we have constructed. Sharing the truth moves down the agenda. In fact, sharing the truth outside the “institution” becomes difficult because so-called “ghetto language” is only understood by insiders. Such “church vocabulary” combines with a tendency to “dogmatize” truth in such a way that it sounds too much like philosophy or ideology to those outside. “Insiders” struggle to express themselves in ways that will allow the power and life of the gospel to be recognized in their witness. Christians know the gospel is “relevant” but have difficulty making their communication of the gospel relevant to their unchurched audience. Some members have trouble seeing the relevance of Christianity to their life, with several effects. They may dichotomize their life into “secular” and “spiritual” compartments and view Christianity as a “future benefit.” They may lose sight of “Church” while becoming wrapped up in “church.” In any case, reducing the living organism that the Body of Christ is to an institution will undermine evangelism.

There are other equally debilitating barriers to evangelism. It can become demoralizing to engage in “ecclesiastical pathology.” Identifying barriers to witness dare not become a litany of finger-pointing or self-defeating hand wringing. Self-study is healthy only when conducted in a framework of positive commitment to mission, faith in the promises of God and the power of his Word, and ongoing, spiritual nurture. The point is that God equips believers for evangelism. The Gospel with which he equips them above all is self-authenticating, self-detonating spiritual dynamite. We seek only to offer as little resistance to its “free course” as possible.

Since no essay is complete without a quotation from Martin Luther, let me close this section with words of Luther cited by Richard Lischer in his book *Speaking of Jesus*. “While I drink my little glass of Wittenberg beer, the gospel runs its course.”

II. The Church Equips the Believers for Evangelism

Return for a moment to the military analogy. A recruit, who has all the requisite qualifications, is patriotically motivated and assured of all necessary field equipment and weaponry, is sent to basic training. Upon completion of boot camp he will likely be assigned to a “specialty” for more specific training and experience. Before seeing action he will be assigned to a platoon, company, battalion, etc. for mutual support and accountability. He will understand the logistical support he can expect from the armed forces while he is in the field.

Like the army, the church equips believers whom God has recruited, motivated, qualified and outfitted, at three levels. Basic training applies to all Christians. It includes spiritual growth and discipleship training that is ongoing. It prepares the whole Christian army for a life of personal witness. Because God has given spiritual gifts for diverse roles in the church’s ministry, specialized training and experience should equip believers for teaching, counseling/comforting, administration, etc. One of those specialty-training areas is evangelism. Finally, the church equips both witnesses and evangelists with fellowship groups for support and accountability as well as logistical support ranging from structure and strategy to programs and resources of outreach.

Above all, the church must back this program of training with a clear sense of mission and a demonstrable will to accomplish the mission. The war in Vietnam will provide a negative illustration of this in our military analogy. Countless evangelism programs, initiated with the enthusiasm of some of the members but floundering for lack of congregational consensus, make the point in church life.

Basic training begins in the home. There the Christian faith is most readily discussed and applied to life. There spiritual growth is most easily targeted to individual gifts, needs and circumstance. In the informal and accepting atmosphere of the home, children as well as adults acquire the skills of verbalizing their faith. The home provides the best support group and strategy source for evangelism. Parents help their children in the effort to win neighbor kids. The whole family prays for and witnesses to unchurched relatives. The family has a unifying mission in the neighborhood that adds purpose to the way they live and importance to the neighborhood “block party.”

No one would argue that the portrait of a Christian home just given is a contemporary exception. We have wrung our hands and shook our heads long enough about the sorry state of the family, while at the same time maintaining that the home is primary and fundamental in Christian education. It is time to give primary and fundamental effort to developing program and resources for the Christian home. Not only the church and its individual members are at risk for the failure of the family, but the lost souls around us are being ignored - even repelled - by failure in the Christian home.

Formal Christian education has long been the key ingredient in training believers. No one has given more attention to the formal Christian education of children than the Wisconsin Synod. An impressive percentage of our children attend Lutheran elementary schools and high schools. Yet, our church body and evangelism are not an immediate association to most people. Let me suggest several reasons for that.

Equipping believers for evangelism has not been an intentional objective of Christian education. Adult Christian education has been lacking in curricular structure, clear objectives, sufficient opportunity and significant participation. Specific curricular and “hands on” education for evangelism has been limited at best and typically restricted to the training of a few evangelism “specialists.” Opportunities for lay ministry experience have been too few and limited largely to middle-aged and older men. Educational methodology has leaned primarily on lecture and memorization, which do not promote personalizing and verbalizing the Christian message. Our pastors and teachers have had little or no evangelism training and experience prior to (and sometimes after) entering the ministry, with the result that their example and their verbal applications of Scripture have not significantly advanced evangelism.

Praise God that all of these issues are being addressed in our synod. Many of our synod’s teachers have begun to develop approaches to the home and to training for evangelism. Greater emphasis on adult Christian education exists. The Board for Parish Services is studying the development of a lay ministry curriculum. The worker training process now includes some evangelism instruction for seminarians. Pray God that He will bless and continue what has only begun.

God HAS blessed our synod with the essential ingredients of basic training, which begins and ends with his Word. Apart from a clear understanding of and commitment to that Word there can be no real evangelism. Without a clear distinction between law and gospel, evangelism will go awry. In basic training the truths and skills of discipleship apply as well to mutual admonition and encouragement as to Christian witness. The key is to view Christian education as equipping disciples for ministry, not merely transmitting truth.

Several principles of Christian education for discipleship will promote basic training for evangelism. We should teach the power and promise as well as the truth of Christianity. All three elements characterize the New Testament Church. We should encourage personal expression of truth. Personal testimony is frequent in Acts and the epistles. (By way of example, a word has not been fully assimilated into our vocabulary until we use it in conversation.) We should make applications of Scripture specific and concrete. Examples and “situation studies” help people learn how to use truth. Applications of truth for unchurched acquaintances not only reinforce our sense of mission but assist people in their specific life of witness. Application that is directive, coupled with “how to” suggestions and mutual reinforcement, will provide learning by doing. We should recognize the importance of “modeling” and sharing by the teacher. Jesus used this approach, teaching by example and letting the disciples know his mind and heart. Anecdotal reinforcement of a lesson usually drives home the point. The “mentor-protégé” method of training St. Paul used can pair experienced lay ministers with new and young disciples in out-of-classroom modeling. We should place as much emphasis on Christian education for adults as for children. (A recent study found this a common denominator of rapidly growing churches.) The gap between confirmation and active involvement in the church’s ministry, together with the intellectual and emotional maturing that takes place after adolescence, necessitates a structure and approach to adult education. The various levels of spiritual growth among adults suggest the need for broader as well as deeper opportunities in adult Bible study. We should utilize the communications tools of our age to promote individualized Christian education. Videotape and audio-cassettes overcome scheduling conflicts, serve those who do not read well and allow self-paced learning. Of course, the communications “explosion” of our age necessitates pooling the gifts of the Body of Christ, for no one church can hope to develop all the Christian education resources its people can use.

Basic training for evangelism includes also the worship and “Body life” of the church. Inspiring worship that focuses God’s grace and promise, reminds believers of and directs them to their mission, and is arranged with the expectation that friends and visitors are present will contribute significantly to equipping the saints and enabling their outreach to the lost. Church organizations that are structured in support of the church’s mission, address contemporary spiritual needs, and are open to unchurched friends and acquaintances will also equip and enable witnesses. Small-group and informal Christian fellowship/Bible study opportunities provide support and substance to Christian witness as well as avenues of invitation to non-Christian friends.

Specific training for evangelism involves all believers at one level and “specialists” at another. All Christians can and should be prepared for INVITATION OUTREACH and RELATIONAL WITNESSING. Those with specific gifts should be recruited, equipped and called to ministry in VISITATION EVANGELISM and TEACHING EVANGELISM.

Invitation outreach, identified frequently with Andrew and Philip in John 1, has both a traditional and contemporary dimension. Christians convinced by the Spirit of their own salvation and God’s will that all be saved quite naturally invite acquaintances to learn what they have learned, where they have learned it. The church can promote, rather than assume, invitation outreach in a number of ways. Sermons, Bible classes, newsletters and organizational meetings are means by which to focus Christian mission and “ground-level” involvement in it. “Open House” activities, “Friendship Sundays” and a variety of seminars that address contemporary concerns with Christian truth give members special opportunities to invite their acquaintances. Attractive literature provides members with a tool of invitation. Brief “how to” sessions and printed back-up will help members identify acquaintances for invitation and overcome their fears in extending an invitation. The simplest way to confront people with law and gospel is on our “turf.” Getting them there is what invitation outreach is about. That doesn’t happen often apparently, largely because we don’t work at making it happen. Many members aren’t sure their acquaintances are “wanted” at their church, or they aren’t sure their acquaintances will “want” what seems programming designed for members only. It never really occurs to many members that they should invite their acquaintances. And Christians too often labor under negative and inaccurate assumptions about the unchurched people they know. If the Gallup poll that indicated 54% of America’s unchurched are willing to reconsider the church is correct, intentionalizing invitation outreach should be a priority in our strategy of equipping believers of all ages.

Invitation outreach in this generation includes additional ways to involve any believer. “Farming” allows members to contact the people in their neighborhood with literature from the church repeatedly. “Block watch” new resident outreach identifies new neighbors for invitation. Other so-called “transitional outreach” programs provide for either in-person or mailed contact with new parents and others who may be interested in the church’s ministry as a result of change in their life. Direct mail and telephone approaches offer information and invitation to large numbers of people in the community. Canvassing door-to-door is still an effective way of identifying the lost and expressing our interest in them. The mass media allow members with special talents, as well as all who can provide financial support, to participate in extending the church’s invitation. The church can equip its members for these basic-level opportunities in mission without long training programs; but without high-level emphasis, recruitment, structure, communication and support, such invitation outreach frequently suffers premature death. Getting members involved at this level may generate enthusiasm for deeper involvement in evangelism.

Relational witnessing has always been the most “natural” form of evangelism. Passages such as Mark 2:15, Luke 8:38-39, Acts 16:14-15 and others demonstrate that relationships form bridges for gospel witness. The acronym F R A N defines our relational network as friends, relatives, associates (work and social/recreational), and neighbors. While relational witnessing may be natural, it apparently doesn’t occur with the same frequency today as in the first century Church. An expanding body of research and a whole genre of literature on “friendship” or “life-style” evangelism demonstrate that this is the current trend in evangelism circles. The fact that more time is spent on relationship building than sin-and-grace sharing betrays a weakness in much of the literature; but this also points out the difficulty and the value of Christian relationships with the unchurched.

Programs, seminars and Bible studies, as well as audio-visual tools and books, are available to assist congregations in equipping believers for relational witness. Several are in use within our synod and several have been or soon will be produced by members of our synod. Experience suggests that intentional, long-term effort is necessary to make relational witnessing a significant element in the life and ministry of both individual believers and church. What follows is an outline for a program of equipping believers for relational witnessing. While this outline emphasizes what may be called “strategic witness,” a result should also be “spontaneous witness” - effective use of opportunities presented by strangers and casual acquaintances.

The first element in equipping for relational witness is helping members understand themselves. Confronting the fears and barriers that inhibit witness and discussing what God gives and does to stimulate witness are the focus. Bible study directed at our Christian identity and mission is the means.

A second element helps members recognize their opportunities for relational witness. Specific people are identified and “profiled.” An understanding of unchurched people is cultivated. Sensitivity to witness “openings” and witness “barriers” is fostered, both those arising out of the life and conversation of a friend and those that result from our initiative. Bible study, sociological research and the sanctified common sense of evangelism experience contribute to the learning.

A third element works toward building relationships through Christian love, active listening, commonalities, self-disclosure, the commitment to “being available” and a lot of prayer.

The fourth element - building verbal witness - is never really completed. Ongoing training exists in every Bible class and devotional study the Christian utilizes. But a phased program of witness-building should be specific. Initially, what may be termed “first-person witnessing” can be taught. At its simplest level this is brief and frequent conversation about what’s happening in our life events at church, spiritual discoveries and reasons to thank God, as well as just plain “God talk.” Such simple testimony invites opportunities for more extended witness, at the other person’s initiative or our own. On a more extensive level “first-person witnessing” may be what several authors have called: “Your Story My Story - His Story.” It begins with active listening to determine what “doors” for witness may exist in the attitudes, experiences, situations and feelings of the other person. Relating “my story” to a point of witness in “your story” is describing how my Christian faith has helped me with similar situations or feelings, as a bridge to “His story.” “His Story” witness may begin at some event or message in Jesus’ life that can be related to the witness “door” discovered, but always ends at the cross with God’s story of salvation.

The final element of relational witnessing is nurture. Following through on our first-person witness includes introducing and involving other Christians from our church in the “project” and extending invitations to programs and classes at our church that will confirm and elaborate Christian truth. Our own continuing witness can take several forms. RSVP - the rear-screen, audio-visual explanation of sin and grace in use synodically, is a non pressure approach for both witness and friend. Christian literature and Bible portions, including any of a number of published self-study materials, further the no-pressure re-enforcement of witness. Sharing what we’re learning in Bible classes and sermons is additional low-key witness. With a little work, most members will feel comfortable enough to use portions of Scripture to give their own explanation of law and gospel. Romans 3:21-28, Romans 5:1-11, 2 Corinthians 5:17-21 and other sections of Scripture make such “walk-through” witness effective. Yet another approach is to use key salvation words from Scripture as the “word pictures” they are, to build illustrative witness. Words like regeneration (John 3 or Ephesians 2), reconciliation (Romans 5, 11 Corinthians 5), redemption (Ephesians 1:7; 1 Peter 1:18-21), and justification (Romans 3, 5 and 8) have biblical depth and life-relatedness.

The church that is serious about equipping believers for relational witness will begin with a workshop or Bible class series, then add depth with follow-up workshops and continuing reference to relational witness in Bible classes and organizational meetings. It is important to get people to put portions of Scripture into their own words, first in the supportive atmosphere of other believers serious about their mission, as part of the training process. Just as important is to provide a structure of support and “accountability” to counter the inertia of human nature and the tendency to dismiss a “program” as an ecclesiastical fad. Mission Counselor James Radloff speaks of “Go and Grow Groups” as one structure. Existing organizations of the church and less formal “covenant” pairings of committed members, together with the church’s continuing encouragement and resource-providing will offer such support also.

Visitation Evangelism may be the best contemporary parallel for the gift and “office” of evangelist in the New Testament Church. (Ephesians 4:11, Acts 21:8) God-given ability to persuasively engage “strangers” in sin-and-grace conversation will surface most readily in relational witnessing and invitation outreach though such a spiritual gift may be recognized apart from these “every believer” levels of evangelism equipping. (That “boldness” and “persuasiveness” are not the same as “manipulative” should be apparent in verses such as: Colossians 4:5-6, 1 Peter 3:15b, 2 Corinthians 4:2, 1 Thessalonians 2:3-6, Acts 4:29-31, Acts 19:8 and 28:23, 2 Corinthians 5:11.) Visitation evangelists follow up on “prospects” discovered through the invitation outreach approaches described earlier or through contact and referral made via members or the services of the church (visitors to worship, weddings, funerals and special events, as well as contact through hospital and nursing home visitation, VBS and Sunday School etc.). Such evangelists will, of course, also initiate witness contacts with strangers. Jesus provides us with a model for training evangelists. He selected and recruited twelve disciples; and his first “position description” for them was to be “fishers of men” - evangelism. (Mark 1:17) Jesus used a “modeling” approach in training, for Mark 3:14 says: “He appointed twelve that they might be with him and that he might send them out to preach.” The “classroom training” Jesus provided was primarily to build their understanding of the Scriptures and of himself, but by example and directive he equipped them to use truth for mission.

They learned the value of illustrations repeatedly, as well as how to handle objections and opposition. They witnessed the power of Jesus and his gospel in the lives of people and saw how he approached people “where they were” to gain their attention for his kingdom message.

He corrected their misguided enthusiasm and emphasized their need to rely on the power of the Holy Spirit. Again, all this instruction combined the verbal with the visual, because they were with him. Jesus also used “feedback” training techniques, questioning the disciples and challenging them to articulate or do on the basis of what they had learned, then affirming or correcting. He sent them out for “hands on” training in evangelism, then debriefed them (Matthew 10). He focused for them his death and resurrection as the heart of evangelism. Then he commissioned or called them to ministry. (Matthew 28:18-20; John 20:21-23; Acts 1:8) From Jesus the apostles must have learned also the principle St. Paul establishes in 2 Timothy 2:2, that of duplicating and multiplying ministry by training others as they had been trained.

Evangelism training programs such as *Talk About the Savior* and *God’s Great Exchange* incorporate much of what Jesus did. And teaching a basic sin-and-grace presentation outline (this is not a “canned pitch”) is an essential element of training. The elements of such an outline roughly parallel the common points in the evangelism proclamations recorded in Acts. Where such congregational training programs for evangelism need improvement typically is greater depth, continuity and strategy.

Without a background of training in relational witnessing, recruits for a 5 week-or-less evangelism program may lack an understanding of the theology of evangelism, the “philosophy” of evangelism follow-through or nurture, and their role in the bigger picture of congregational strategy to lead people from lost strangers to full discipleship. A “pre-requisite” training course covering such subjects and assuring personal assimilation of the sin-and-grace message would strengthen existing evangelism training programs.

A weakness in many evangelism visitation programs is that there is no strategy for follow-through after one law-gospel visit. The prospect who doesn’t respond immediately may be ignored for too long a time, then visited by a different “stranger” from the church. Several elements of training and strategy can alleviate the problem. Evangelism visitation strategy should include the concept of “prospect ownership.” In other words, an evangelist “owns” a prospect and the primary responsibility for a tailored follow-through with the prospect until that prospect is transferred to a “teaching evangelist” or another visitation evangelist whose personality and approach may be more compatible or the prospect closes the door to personal witness. Another strategic element is the use of mail and literature (including self-study materials) between visits to further the process of confronting people with law and gospel.

Extended evangelism training should equip evangelists with other options for presenting sin and grace. Those suggested in the training for relational witness, especially the “walk-through” witness of selected portions of Scripture, should be part of the ongoing training of evangelists - after, if not before they’ve learned a basic presentation. Other “formalized” approaches developed within our synod such as RSVP, the “listening visit - witness visit” format of mass media assisted outreach and *The Simple Truth* can broaden an evangelist’s list of options and help him tailor a strategy for specific prospects. “Dialog” approaches are a next phase in the training of evangelists - learning to respond to the prospect with diagnostic questioning and a “free-form” witness that weaves the basic truths of sin and grace into a conversation that is “directed” rather than “controlled.” My suggestion for common ground in dialog evangelism is outlined:

PROBLEMS —————> PROBLEM —————> SOLUTION —————> SOLUTIONS.

Unregenerate people have problems and look for solutions. What they’re missing is that problems are just consequences of the real PROBLEM - sin, both universal and personal; and the

SOLUTION in Christ and his cross precedes any meaningful solutions. Dialog witness uses “felt needs” as the door to discussing spiritual needs.

Obviously, advanced training of evangelists is necessary to such broadening and deepening of their work. Bible study targeted for personal growth and application to prospects is the key element. But it is also important to provide training in understanding unchurched people, communication and relational skills, including active listening. Subject to and sanctified by Scripture, the research of psychologists and sociologists can assist our “pre-evangelism.”

Too many congregational efforts at visitation evangelism programs have broken down, first because they were “programs” that were separate from and almost alien to the rest of the congregation’s ministry and secondly, because support and ongoing training for evangelists dwindled.

Referring once more to our military analogy, a church must have a clear sense of mission, a vision or objectives and goals that make the mission concrete, a strategy to accomplish the mission, a structure of coordination and communication, and logistical support including resources for training and for accomplishing goals. Whole essays could be devoted to each of these subjects as well as to such topics as: worship and evangelism, organizations and programs of ministry with evangelism implications, “come” strategies and “go” strategies of outreach, discipling and assimilating the new Christian, and more. But to make the point once more, evangelism must be MISSION, not just program, fully integrated into the theology, philosophy and practice of ministry in the church. Disjointed effort produces such disasters as: trained evangelists with no one to visit for lack of strategy to locate prospects or a huge list of prospects with no one to visit them, new Christians won by the gospel with no way of assimilating them or even apathy on the part of the membership toward their presence. To make the point any more stridently is to risk frustration.

Frustrations, even intimidation, have crippled nascent efforts at evangelism in too many congregations already. Under-staffed ministry, under-developed lay ministry, years of inertia and attitudes lacking mission awareness are obstacles to overcome. Few pastors have the time to immerse themselves in evangelism. Few congregations have the resources to develop all the tools and training of an “ideal” evangelism structure and strategy. The synod’s Board for Evangelism has adopted a realistic approach. Many tools already exist; others will be developed to fill ill gaps. Increasing use of the audio-visual media, with printed resources, can make training in the congregation more practical. No one church can or should use everything, especially not without a phased plan of implementation.

A series of five annual and sequential workshops in every district is one component of the board’s strategy to assist phased development of congregational evangelism, with the premise that each congregation is unique and must build from where it is. The recently concluded “School of Outreach” will be refined to assist churches in developing evangelism planning and program. District evangelism committees are the key to ongoing assistance; and every effort will be made to use the dedicated men of these committees for effective consulting. Cooperation among the synod’s many boards and committees reflects on a synodical level what must exist on the congregational level -integration of evangelism into the life of the church.

A final form of “specialist” evangelism exemplifies that integration. *Teaching Evangelism* is a term I would apply to the outreach ministry of St. Peter in Acts, both large group (Acts 2-3 and 4:2) and small-group (Acts 10) instruction that forms a more extensive exposure to Scripture into transition to “membership.” On the basis of 2 Timothy 4:5 and 1:7-8, Mark McCloskey (in the book *Tell It Often - Tell It Well*) argues that Timothy’s spiritual gifts probably

lay in the area of pastor-teacher rather than evangelist, yet Paul urges him to use his gift and do the work of an evangelist. Many pastors today could relate to this argument. Aquila and Priscilla (Acts 18) may be lay ministry examples of “teaching evangelism.” There are many lay people today who have the gift of teaching, but feel “out of their element” in visitation evangelism.

There are people in our midst who can effectively carry out “teaching evangelism” in large groups. We may, with good reason, avoid the crusade and media format for using their gifts, without denying the legitimacy of such formats. More acceptable may be using the gift of teaching evangelism in seminars and special events to which the community is invited. Note the tie to “invitation outreach” discussed earlier.

Most of our pastors apply “teaching evangelism” in their adult Bible information class for non-members. Some make this form of evangelism more specific by offering 4 to 6 - week “Basic Christianity” courses as a less intimidating bridge to pre-confirmation instruction of adults. Often these mini-courses are conducted in homes to further the “no-pressure” impression. Because people often come to such classes without yet being brought to faith, such teaching is true evangelism in every sense.

Some of our lay people employ teaching evangelism in small-group Bible studies in their homes. Non-Christian friends and neighbors may find this still less intimidating than classes conducted by a pastor. More use of lay people, both in home and at church, could amplify our use of teaching evangelism. This is especially true where a busy pastorate restricts the opportunities for pastor-led adult information classes. Without reservation and frequently without much training, we call lay people to teaching evangelism among children in Vacation Bible School. Equipping members gifted to teach for teaching evangelism among adults, then providing them with appropriate materials, is both biblical and practical. Currently, Pastor Carl Leyrer and the South Central District Evangelism Committee are refining an audio-visual tool for lay-led instruction of non-member adults that uses the rear-screen projector basic to RSVP. Printed and video-taped resources would enhance teaching evangelism by lay people.

A training program for teaching evangelists would logically combine elements of training for lay ministers in adult education and elements of lay ministry evangelism training. Too little currently exists in our circles for any such comprehensive training; but to create the training program would not be difficult were there a “demand.”

The fact that not all elements of an ideal training program for evangelism have been published is not a reason to put the mission on hold, rather the reason for our final point.

III. Believers Equip Themselves For Evangelism

Sometimes lay people express frustration that their church is doing too little in evangelism and offering them little or no opportunity for training and ministry in evangelism. Some such “evangelical frustration” may be the seeds of improvement in congregational outreach, but not if it becomes an excuse for finger-pointing while sideline-sitting. Every believer has been called to a personal life of witness, whether his congregation offers pointed training and structure or not. God has equipped every believer for witness and provided in Scripture sufficient material for personal growth in Christian life and witness. Good Christian soldiers will put into practice what they’ve been given, draw strength from the worship/fellowship/Bible study opportunities that do exist in their church, and make personal use of whatever evangelism resources have been developed within their fellowship.

It is somewhat axiomatic that the best way to learn evangelism is to do evangelism. All the emphasis on training programs will miss the point if we leave an impression that effective

evangelism is the product of polished programs. The best programs are worthless until people DO evangelism. The most insensitive and stumbling witness of the gospel still offers the “power of God for salvation.” Most of us have discovered God’s power at work in spite of us as well as through us; and that discovery only motivates us to equip ourselves better and “do it again.” Every witness and evangelist discovers that he becomes more comfortable, more sensitive, more capable in sharing his faith the more often he does it. We can go too far in attempting to make evangelism easy and comfortable. The uncommitted still won’t do it. Those arm-twisted into “painless” evangelism will quit because we lied to them. Jesus didn’t call people to comfortable and easy mission. He just promised to be there with us and gave us the Holy Spirit and gospel to accomplish his purpose.

Sometimes the church is too apologetic in calling God’s people to responsible discipleship and mission. James 1:22-24 portrays those who won’t be what they’ve been made or do that for which they’ve been called as people who keep coming to church and seeing themselves in the mirror of God’s Word, only to forget what they saw upon leaving. In Hebrews 5:11 ff., God chides people who “by this time ought to be teachers” (or evangelists) for not maturing in their Christian discipleship. This is law, not to manipulate but to lead to repentance so that the joy of forgiveness will make the “gospel imperative” of the Great Commission a privilege eagerly assumed.

Consider as a close these words of Martin Luther from his sermon on John 20:19-31: “The first and highest work of love a Christian ought to do when he has become a believer, is to bring others also to believe in the way he himself came to believe. And here you notice Christ begins and institutes the office of the ministry of the eternal Word in every Christian . . . Let us lay hold of this, for we must admit it was spoken to us. In this way the Lord desires to say:Hence I send you into the world as my Father hath sent me; namely, that every Christian should instruct and teach his neighbor, that he may also come to Christ. By this, no power is delegated exclusively to popes and bishops, but all Christians are commanded to profess their faith publicly and also to lead others to believe.”

We Are Therefore Christ’s Ambassadors as though God Were Making His Appeal Through Us! - 2 Corinthians 5:20