

FROM THE PRESIDENT

Facing 2006



LIFELINES

by Rev. Dr. Gerhard Michael Jr.
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In several places in his Pulitzer Prize winning book, *1776*, David McCullough comments that George Washington, the commander-in-chief of the Continental Army, "saw things as they were, not as he wished them to be."

As we begin another year of grace, it seems to me that seeing matters realistically can assist us in responding to the challenges before us.

Recently *The Lutheran Annual 2006* arrived. In the statistical section in the rear of the book, I noticed that the net gain of new members for the Florida-Georgia District was 137. Compared to some Districts, this was a positive number, but when I think of the thousands upon thousands of new residents coming to Florida and Georgia each year, and the new missions we are seeking to establish, I am disappointed that we are not showing more growth than that. But this is the reality with which we are dealing.

To counter the lack of growth, evangelism is what is called for, in my opinion. By this I do not mean some type of "Each one reach one" type of campaign, but that each of us individually shares our faith

winsomely and effectively, as God gives us opportunity.



Evangelism is sometimes misunderstood as knocking on doors, which certainly can be part of it, but it is much more than that. Evangelism is witnessing to who God is, what he has done for us and all people in Jesus Christ, and doing it in a way that "gives grace to those who hear." (Ephesians 4:29)

For evangelism to be effective, the first step

must surely include listening to the people with whom we associate. If we don't know where their concerns or hurts are, how can we connect the Gospel to their lives?

Evangelism is what is called for ... each of us individually sharing our faith winsomely and effectively, as God gives us opportunity ... witnessing to who God is, what he has done for us and all people in Jesus Christ, and doing it in a way that "gives grace to those who hear." (Ephesians 4:29)

Secondly, for evangelism to be effective, what we say has to have Gospel content. If we do not know the basics of our faith, as taught in the Scriptures, how will we be able to give a witness that hits the mark? Of course, this is much more than a formula, or a sharing of something like four spiritual laws, which does not proclaim what God has done, but rather lays a burden on the one hearing as to what he must do!

Thirdly, I believe that it is critical that our preaching, teaching and counseling announce what God has done for us in Jesus Christ. If our speech within the

church reflects a legalistic and moralistic approach to the faith, we preachers and teachers will not be empowering our laity to witness to Jesus.

Fourthly, the matter of witnessing is an ongoing process. Sometimes our testimony will evoke an immediate response, but most often it takes time for the word to germinate, sprout and grow, before fruit is produced. Given the power of the Word we preach, however, we need not lose heart for the Seed is good, for it encases in its hull the story of Jesus, the person through whom we have salvation. It is the power of God!



Another challenge facing us in 2006, I believe, is whetting the appetite of our people to hunger and thirst for the Word of God. Somehow we need so to

present the Word, that people will come running, demanding, "Teach us the Word! Provide Bible classes for us! Help us grow in understanding the Biblical narrative into which we were engrafted by our Baptisms into Christ."

Without a solid grounding in the Biblical revelation, we will be subject to the whims of our culture — lured by that which captures attention for the moment but doesn't last for eternity; we will be pulled and drawn by the fads and fashions of society, without having a clear standard by which to evaluate and test the worth of the different emphases bombarding us.

How are you doing personally in your Bible study? Do you have a feel for the flow of the argument in the letters Paul wrote to the Galatians or the Corinthians, for instance, or the context to which Isaiah addressed his prophecies, or for the power of the Gospels as their stories and dialogs are strung together in a very deliberate, intentional fashion to communicate the message of Christ?

I believe it is also worth asking about the Bible classes in your congregation. Are they well attended? Do they really help you get into the Word, understand its message and apply it to your life? Do your study opportunities amount to more than a time to get together, or do they resource you for the challenges we face in a world that is at best indifferent to the Christian faith and at worst is hostile to it? Let your pastor or

DCE know how your classes can be more helpful.



As we face 2006, I'd like to lift up another area of concern: our worship life. Our Synod will be coming out with a new hymnal toward the end of the year. More important than the introduction of the new book

into our congregations, I believe, is the state of the worship we are doing.

Is the worship we're doing reflective of our Lutheran Biblical theology, or another alien approach to the Scriptures? I have seen and heard enough of the *Purpose Driven Church* and its related materials, that I become a bit nervous about materials that are not carefully sifted through our Lutheran sieve before use.

When our worship life opts to be just contemporary or just traditional, are we cheating those who gather for the former out of the richness of our heritage, and denying the latter the creativity of the new? In our worship life, do not all of us need the old and the new? By retaining the old, we remain anchored. By trying and testing the new, we find our worship life stretched and enriched to

in terms of overall financial stewardship the Florida-Georgia District ranked number one in the Synod. Undoubtedly this reflects the additional income our capital campaign, *Forward Together-Servants in His Mission*, has contributed to enhance our mission and ministry. We are grateful for the generosity of many that has made this possible.

At the same time, when we recognize that stewardship is the management of all the resources God has entrusted to us, to be managed according to his purposes, since He alone is the Owner, we must admit that we have much growing to do. Our goal is not to rank higher than the others, but to learn how to be God's trustees who faithfully carry out their fiduciary responsibilities. Given this perspective, and sin's persistent nature whereby we turn in on ourselves, I do not believe that there is any room for letting up in helping one another to discover the joy of Christian stewardship.

When I think of the way things are in our District — in our witnessing, Christian education, our worship and stewardship, there's no question there's room for continuing improvement and growth.

Finally, the challenge of whole-life Biblical stewardship ... When we recognize that stewardship is the management of all the resources God has entrusted to us, to be managed according to his purposes, since He alone is the Owner, we must admit that we have much growing to do.

respond to the challenges of today, maintaining the faith of our fathers in the language of the children.

Whatever your preference, it seems to me, our worship needs to be Christ-centered, evangelical, true to Scripture and addressing our contemporary situation, a situation which includes our inability to overcome the drag of sin and death that has tyrannized people ever since the fall into sin. If our worship does not have these qualities, I doubt that it will have the staying power to endure for long.



Finally, I believe I need to raise the challenge of whole-life Biblical stewardship. It was very gratifying to note that

Personally I do not shy away from a re-commitment to growth in these critical areas of our life together, and I urge you to make a similar commitment, because of the ultimate reality we have in our midst! This reality is what God has done for us in Jesus Christ, and this is not wishful thinking. It's a matter of history! He has become man — lived a life of perfect stewardship, ever following the Word of God in undivided devotion to his heavenly Father through thick and thin, until finally he gave his all in his death on the cross. The ultimate reality is that he did that for us, that we might be his people, experience his gracious forgiveness, and find in his grace power to keep on working at making things the way he would wish them to be.

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