

FROM THE PRESIDENT

The Challenges Before Us



LIFE LINES
Gerhard C. Michael, Jr.
District President

With the District convention just around the corner, I thought I would use this month's column to share what I perceive to be the challenges before us. Naturally, these thoughts are from one individual's perspective, but I share them in the hope they will stimulate your thinking, lead you to discuss them with others and hopefully by God's grace

if we bring the endpoint to the 2000s: the influence of technology; the number of couples where both spouses work; the incidence of divorce; the ongoing growth, but increasing diversity of the American population; the globalization of industry and commerce; the ease of transportation, etc. etc.

To be more specific, think of how the cities of our District have changed in the last 50 years, Atlanta, Miami, Jacksonville, Orlando, Tampa. Think what has happened in the area of race relations, or how the educational delivery system has changed, or how the role of women has been altered. Change there is a plenty, on all levels.

In the face of all this change, we make a strong assertion: God is the first and the last; besides Him there is no other, and as He says, "I the Lord do not change." (Isaiah 44:6; Mal. 3:6) We people are like grass which flourishes but soon withers and dies; our confidence rests therefore in "the Word of the Lord which endures forever," (Isaiah 40:8) especially when that Word helps

opportunities change brings, including the growing population in our midst, many of our churches are not growing; some are just holding their own; others are declining. Shouldn't the message of a God whose love is steadfast and enduring be something we are eager to share and others would be eager to receive? What has happened to stymie the church's growth in this time of opportunity?

While I have some hunches to explain the church's lack of growth, including the opposition which naturally arises from the Enemy, I prefer here to suggest positive ways we can respond to the challenges before us, and which will hopefully lead by God's grace to growth both spiritually and numerically.

1st While the first point should be obvious, I make it anyway because I believe that without a continual focus on the grace of God, we will not help people know Him as He truly is. For the church to grow and be healthy, at the center must be the good news of our Lord Jesus Christ. The church dare not shift from its message which makes clear that our dilemma has been created by our self-centeredness, by living apart from Him who created us for a relationship with Himself.

Further, and just as clearly, it must tell the good news of rescue from our bondage to ourselves through Jesus Christ, His holy life, innocent death and triumphant resurrection. Always that message of sin and grace must remain central.

2nd Secondly, I believe that it will be helpful for us to combat what I call the "island mentality," whereby we isolate ourselves individually and as congregations from one another. Since there is only "one body" (Ephesians 4:4) of Christ, let us figure out ways to work together on the congregational, circuit, district, and synodical levels. By resourcing one another, we can help each other respond to the challenges before us.

The demographic changes happening in the Miami-Fort Lauderdale area are not unique to one congregation. Is there not some way that our congregations and workers can collaborate to respond to those changes? Those engaged in planting new congregations can learn from one another.

Can you imagine one of our Christian Day Schools being at full strength if the staff does not meet, plan and support one another in their efforts? If each classroom was on its own, how well would the instruction prepare the students for their next grade level?

Teamwork is essential. I believe Benjamin Franklin once said, "If we don't all hang together,

er, we will all hang separately." For the church to respond effectively to the opportunities before us, our workers and congregations cannot be "loners."

3rd Thirdly, I am convinced that we will need to do a better job of equipping one another to witness to the Lord Jesus. People need the message He means. Some are burdened with guilt; others lack direction for their lives; others still are troubled in their relationships; some are despairing, and others are obnoxious due to their inflated self-opinion. For all people, no matter what their situation may be, Jesus Christ is the One who brings forgiveness, meaning, love, hope, peace and a clear sense of identity. We have a story to tell, a Savior to share.

To do this effectively, I am convinced that we will need to do a number of things: teach our people the story of Jesus and salvation, so they know it well enough to relay it; help our people learn to listen to others that they might sense how their need shows itself; and then give them practical on the job training, that with confidence they can share the good news.

The whole church is called to witness, as the priesthood of all believers makes clear. This privilege is not just the province of professional church workers. The laity are located where the opportunities are: in the workplace, school, hospital, gym or golf course and especially the home, where our witnessing is probably most needed!

4th Fourthly, leadership identification and recruitment, training and deployment, support and encouragement are essential. With two-thirds of the Synod's clergy 45 years and older, this need is especially true for pastors. The need to recruit new leaders is not just to replace those who will retire, resign or die, but also to advance the missionary movement by planting new churches our growing population needs.

I see a growing opportunity for our Concordia House of Studies to play a major role in equipping leaders for the church's missionary needs — teachers for our schools, certified lay ministers, future pastors, directors of Christian Education and the like. Additionally, I see circuits banding together to provide seminars for lay leaders, that the quality of leadership might be enhanced, to say nothing of the ongoing emphasis in our congregations to support those in positions of leadership.

5th Fifthly, to help us respond to the growing population with its diverse ways

in which the need for salvation manifests itself, I am convinced that sustaining our emphasis on church planting is required. Studies have shown that starting new churches is one of the most effective ways to reach people for Jesus Christ. Existing congregations can certainly do it too, but the freshness of a new mission is inviting to many, and the excitement of a new beginning is conducive to people making a new beginning in their faith.

A number of years ago we made a commitment to start each year new congregations equivalent to 3% of our existing congregations. That means that we should be planting six or seven new churches each year. Some can be planted by existing congregations (a mother-daughter church arrangement), others by a cluster of congregations such as a circuit, and still others by the District. How it is done is not critical, but that it is done.

At the same time that we emphasize new church starts, I must hasten to add that our existing congregations have room for growth! I can't think of a single congregation in our District which does not have opportunities to grow. There's no shortage of people as might be the case with some of our Synod's rural congregations where the farms are getting bigger and the people fewer.

6th Finally, for our District and its congregations to grow, I believe we need to emphasize biblical stewardship, helping one another, particularly in the area of our finances, to be generous for the Lord's work. Personally I do not think that we have a shortage of funds, but a lack of helping our people understand that they all we have belongs to God and that ours is the privilege of managing it in a way that brings glory to God and his love to others. By teaching one another how to manage our resources wisely and well, we can raise the dollars needed to fund the mission God has entrusted to us.

In closing, we might ask, where will we get the power and the wisdom to respond wholeheartedly to the opportunities God is placing before us? The answer I believe is clear but simple: in the cross of Jesus Christ, for there the wisdom and power of God has been revealed. As the cross is imprinted on lives, our relationships, and our pocketbooks, we will have more than enough power to do what God asks.

We can do all things through Him who gave Himself totally for us. That's the power of the cross!

-gcm

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Approximately 20 years ago, noted church consultant Lyle Schaller wrote the book *It's a Different World*. In this book Schaller shared significant ways in which the world had changed from the 1950s to the 1980s.

Those of us who remember the '50s can personally vouch for many of the changes which have taken place, particularly

us realize that His steadfast love is at the heart of His changelessness.

The question is: how do we who believe in this changeless God respond to the changes taking place in our society? Isn't the changing scene an opportunity to point others to our gracious God who is unchanging in his love for all?

What is disappointing to me is that, in spite of all the



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