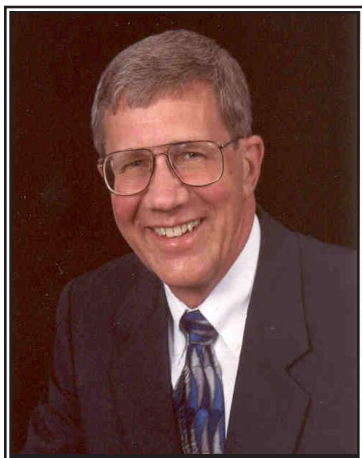


FROM THE PRESIDENT

Using our Minds for the Mission



**LIFE
LINES**

Gerhard C. Michael, Jr.
District President

With school starting again, I thought it appropriate to urge us to use our minds in the service of our faith, lest we fail to fulfill our role in God's plan to use the church to reach the world with His love.

At times, I wonder if we have stuffed our minds into our back pockets like a used handkerchief and sat on them. Even though our intellects have been given to us to help us make responsible decisions that accord with the will of God, I wonder if we often don't fail to think issues through and instead let our emotions determine what we do. Rather than saying, "I think for such and so a reason, this is what we should do," we respond with viewpoints that we introduce with, "I feel."

The emotions are not to be neglected, for the command to love God is to be done, as Deuteronomy 6:5 records, "with all your heart and with all your soul, and with all your might." Interestingly, when Jesus answers His questioners about the great commandment, He inserts the word "mind" into the response we owe God. In Luke 10:27 and Mark 12:30, the word, "mind," is added to the other three,

but in Matthew 22:37, He has heart, soul, and mind, but omits strength or might. This suggests to me that our minds should definitely be used in the service of the mission for which God has enlisted us.

This reality underlies the church's educational enterprise. It provides the rationale for our Sunday Schools and Day Schools, our Confirmation instruction and adult Bible classes, our colleges and seminaries. It urges each of us to plug into those opportunities which can equip us to live as the people of God, instructing us so that what we reflect in our words, relationships and actions is what God wants and not just what our sinful nature or the world wants.

If you want to discover how the world thinks, just look at television for a number of hours. Consider the ads you see: what do they tell you? Look at the sitcoms, and ask yourself what values and principles are leading these people to speak and act the way they do. Watch the news magazines and listen to

significant, quality time meditating on it and by engaging with our brothers and sisters to clarify what we are studying, we can face the challenges, opportunities and difficulties in a Biblically responsible way. It's not easy, but it's worth the effort. Let me illustrate how this might take place.

As I make my way around the District, meeting with pastors and other church professionals, lay leaders and other members, I sense that we sometimes give in to the world's way of thinking, a way that is not only counterproductive but actually contrary to the convictions we hold as Christians. Let's try to see how the negative thinking we sometimes slip into can be countered by the Word of God, so that we experience the truth of which Paul writes when he says in Romans 12:2, "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God — what is good and acceptable and perfect?"

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the analysts and commentators and ask whether there might not be a certain arrogance displayed that suggests, "I know best what needs to happen." How much reflection of God's understanding of human nature, of His way of dealing with conflicts in the world, of His plan for hope and peace in the world do you observe?

If our minds are going to be used in the service of the Gospel, so that we can say with the Apostle Paul in I Corinthians 2:16, "We have the mind of Christ," it will be necessary for us to immerse ourselves in the Word of God and internalize its wisdom. By spending some

Please examine with me a number of examples of what I call "false thinking." Let's see if the Scriptures can open our minds, so that instead of the world squeezing us into its mold we reflect the goodness of God in our speech, conduct, relationships and attitudes. Can we have our minds renewed so that with confidence, hope, and joy, we can carry out our work?

The Island Mentality

The "island mentality" occurs when individuals or congregations turn in on themselves. Rather than thinking of how they are linked in partnership with their sister congregations, they say, "What has the District done for me? Why should I support it? We have enough work to do in our own congregation; how can they expect me to reach out beyond our own parish?"

In reality, that self-centeredness forgets the wisdom God teaches us, "We are the body of Christ and individually members of it." (I Corinthians 12:27) Through our association with one another, into which God thrusts us by virtue of our baptisms, we are called to pray for one another, assist one another, learn from one another and reach out with the love of God to all people. By fighting the island mentality, we are enriched by the resources others bring to the table, and we discover the joy that comes from working together on projects too big for just one individual or congregation.

The Survival Mentality

Some times our churches slip into the survival mentality. They sense their church is not growing; their numbers are shrinking; it's getting harder to pay the bills and find people to serve in the various offices. "Can we survive?" is the anxious question that pervades the congregational culture. In a day when many people approach church membership as consumers, they ask, what can the church do for me, and shrinking churches with a less than hopeful attitude prove to be less than inviting.

Immersing oneself into the Word of God, however, transforms the climate. We realize that the survival of our institution is not what gives us hope. It's the fact that our God is a living God. In His Son Jesus Christ, He has conquered death and opened the gates to the future. There is no room for despair. Just as Jesus caused the hearts of the Emmaus disciples to burn with joy because of His living presence, so too our small congregations can radiate the hope and joy we have in our living Lord. As our minds are renewed by what God has done for us, we become different people; the culture of our congregations changes and we become places that welcome others and begin to grow.

We dare not let our circumstances dictate our attitudes and actions, but rather the good news of what God has done for us. Our minds thus serve the mission!

thrust is that the individual who had been abused is a child of God, loved by God with a worth and dignity of which she cannot be robbed. The reality of what God had done for her in Jesus Christ trumps the sick behavior she had suffered at the hands of another. When the mind is renewed by the good news of God's love, life can begin anew.

The Graduation Mentality

I list this negative type of thinking last because I believe in many ways it keeps the church from being different from the world. Without ongoing growth in the grace and knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ, (II Peter 3:18), we just naturally slip into the old ways. Continuing education dare not be optional for us Christians. If we are going to stay the course, then we will need to have that course taught and reinforced again and again, enriched and expanded so that we are equipped to meet the new challenges that come our way.

Confirmation is often treated as the last course one needs to take, but can you imagine an eighth grader knowing all there is to know in math, science, geography or any other subject at the tender age of 14? Or how would he or she know and understand the wisdom that should inform and influence one as a husband or wife, or a parent or grandparent?

When Paul wrote to the Ephesians and corrected them, he said, "You did not so learn Christ." (4:20) There had been

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basic instruction, perhaps like a Confirmation course, but his letter illustrates, there is more to learn. And so, his letter instructs them further. When I think of Jesus' invitation in Matthew 11:29, "learn of me," I do not see how we can give in to the graduation mentality which says, I learned enough. When the object of our learning is nothing less than the perfect Son of God in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge (Colossians 2:3), I don't see how we will ever want to quit growing!

In closing, may I encourage you to harness your minds in the service of the Gospel, that we may carry out the mission God has entrusted to us with conviction, compassion, and power. Transformed by the renewal of our minds, we will be different from the world in which we live and we will make a difference that is eternal!

The Victim Mentality

Sometimes individuals fall into the trap of feeling victimized. Perhaps they have suffered abuse at the hands of a family member or an uncaring superior. Churches too can suffer as a result of a military base closing, members leaving through job transfers, immoral behavior by a church employee, and the like. If individuals or churches get stuck feeling sorry for themselves, excusing themselves from reaching out because of something that happened in the past, I believe that they are not letting the wisdom of God's revelation overpower the difficult circumstances they have experienced.

In his book, *Little Lamb, Who Made Thee*, author Walter Wangerin, Jr., prints a letter he had written to an individual who had been abused sexually by her father. It is an emotion laden piece, but the ultimate



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