



LOVED AND SENT

SOMETHING GREAT IS ASKED OF US

The Occasion

In the past year I've been engaged in conversation with leaders from across our church body regarding the future of the LCMS. In the course of this conversation, I was asked to share my perspective on what a "hopeful vision" for the future might look like. It was a preposterous request. Do I have any right to propose something? What are my qualifications?

Nonetheless I have been convinced by respected leaders in the LCMS to share my perspective because it may well be a unique one. My ministry experience includes urban and suburban contexts, church planting, multi-ethnic ministry, youth ministry, education, and senior leadership. My twenty-year tenure as a St. Louis pastor places me at the crossroads of activity in the LCMS. I have worked extensively in multi-congregational networks and alliances within and outside the LCMS. Finally, I am simply a parish pastor. I have no formal role in the institutional side of the church. I have no ambition for anything but my call as a pastor of God's people in a local place. Therefore, I have nothing to lose (or gain) in sharing this paper. I simply offer the perspective of a pastor on the frontline of ministry in an era of seismic change.

When speaking about "the state of the Synod," the easy impulse is lament or complaint. The conversations gravitate to politics, theological differences, history, or the tension between "missional" and "confessional." I take a simpler approach: What is our honest reality and what is a hopeful response?

Something Great is Asked

The reality is self-evident: Our society is increasingly distant from God. Our neighbors are desperately struggling to find identity and purpose apart from Jesus Christ. At a time when the church's witness is most needed, our

denomination is experiencing significant decline and loss. Our reactive response is fear and retreat. The results of this response are clear:

- A profound decline in the number of LCMS Lutherans.
- The loss of younger generations.
- Churches closing and more communities without a gospel presence.
- Fewer pastors and professional church workers.
- A diminished witness to the world.

Something great is asked of God's people in each generation. The greatness of the sacrifice given inspires a great response. God's own Son has come to reconcile us to himself. **"See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God" (1 John 3:1).** Our forefathers in the faith responded by great sacrifice.

Something great was asked of them. So, the church has always grown most where it sacrificed most. Stephen's martyrdom meant gospel diaspora. Antioch sending meant St. Paul's worldwide missionary journeys. Augustine turned from wealth and pleasure to make his Confessions. Luther risked life and comfort for the undying conviction that we are justified by grace through faith for Christ's sake. In every era, something great has been asked.

Something great was asked of the forefathers and mothers of our little tribe, The Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod. German immigrants endured sea and sickness, left all they knew and loved of their Saxony home, because they were compelled by the gospel's power. Other Germans answered the call to be sendlinge, "sent ones" to a strange American continent. Extraordinary resources were collected in order to deploy young men and whole families to be missionaries on a new frontier. Families said farewell at the dock and never saw one another again.

This is the infancy of our 177-year-old church body. We have never been a perfect people of God. Our history is littered with mistakes and misfits. Yet God has been faithful not to abandon us. Still, he sees fit to use this earthen vessel into the 21st century. Our forefathers and mothers have been lifted out of miry pits and set upon a rock, left speechless except for the words, "Only by grace." They exhibited a wild trust in the Spirit working in the Word. When something as great as the gospel of Jesus is bestowed, a great response is required.

Something great was asked of those before us. "Go from your country and kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you" (Gen. 12:1). **"Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it" (Matt. 10:39).** **"If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me" (Matt. 16:24).** "Whoever would be first among you must be your slave . . ." (Matt. 20:27). Our ancestors responded in faith with action. This is our heritage. "We are all dwarves standing on the shoulders of giants."

I come from this tributary of faith. I am a sixth generation LCMS pastor. My ancestor, Ottmar Cloeter, was one of Wilhelm Loehe's sendlinge. He was deployed from Germany in 1849 to be an agent of the gospel in the young American experiment. After serving as the first pastor of Holy Cross Lutheran in Saginaw, Michigan, he answered a missionary call to the Ojibwe people in the Crow Wing area of northern Minnesota. The Cloeter family settled in the new land, built a cabin, and raised small children in the wilderness. They fought mosquitoes in the summer and fatal cold in the winter. All the while Ottmar fumbled through the Ojibwe language, labored to build relationships, seeking somehow to convey the gospel in a foreign context.

My own heritage is an example of our shared inheritance. When I feel defeated in ministry, I think of the “cloud of witnesses” gone before. Selfless sending. Sacrificial expenditure. This is the narrow path, the way of the cross, by which our ancestors tread. As Lutherans, we possess a clarity of the gospel that demands a daring response. We are “frontier people,” called to the margins and edges because that’s where our Lord is.

Something great was asked of our forebears. I am convinced that something great is asked of us. I hardly need to sketch our modern American “frontier.” You are acquainted with the time in which we live. In Acts we have the testimony of a church facing insurmountable challenges in a vast, pluralist empire. In many respects, the 21st century is not unlike the 1st century.

I have been a parish pastor for twenty years. The last five have been unlike the previous fifteen. While “there is nothing new under the sun,” humans find new ways to perpetrate the old rebellion of Eden and Babel. We face challenges distinct in human history. Is this an epoch like the Enlightenment or Industrial Revolution? What we know is that every aspect of life feels uncertain and unstable. Government, economics, science, technology, social structure, family, institutions, and religion. Pope Francis has gotten this much right when he said, “We are not facing an age of change, but a change of age.”

What does the church do in times of instability? A natural reflex is retreat. We all have an innate desire for homeostasis. We resist the discomfort of change. There is an instinct to return to the safety of a controlled environment.

Some in our denomination cast retreat as a noble act. There is a narrative that somehow we are being faithful in withdrawal. It is presumed that decline is proof of doctrinal purity. That the fewer we are, the more faithful we are. That the cause of our dwindling is the world’s rejection of the gospel. I think the world hardly knows we exist, let alone hears what we are whispering in our sanctuaries. They cannot reject what they have not heard (Rom. 10:14). We too often proclaim the gospel in the safety of our own house while the neighborhood is unaware we are even home.

The narrative of noble decline smells more of fear than faithfulness. We have lost much. Loss breeds fear. Fear’s reflex is retreat. Fear breeds more loss, perpetuating a sick cycle of blame, self-pity, and despair. But fear has never been a good advisor, and “perfect love casts out fear” (1 John 4:18).

Something great is asked of the LCMS precisely at the precipice of her great decline. A few facts:

- *The LCMS has lost roughly three quarters of a million baptized members from 2000–2020. 2,553,917 in 2000 to 1,807,408 in 2020. That number has most certainly declined further in subsequent years.*
- *Residential seminary enrollment fell by 55% from 2010–2024.*
- *In 2018 we had 10 Concordia Universities in the CUS. Six years later we in essence have five. (The closure of Selma, Portland, Bronxville. The departure of CTX and the shell of Ann Arbor.) This is not to debate the causes but state the result. This is emblematic of our larger crisis. Our traditional pipeline for youth and workers is cut in half.*

I refrain from commentary on any synodical administration. The office of president is a role of extreme sacrifice. God bless the man who occupies an impossible position. There are forces at work here that extend beyond the influence of any man, save Jesus Christ (Eph. 6:12).

Set aside all the contributing factors. My point is that on this course, the coming generations will have buildings but few people in them. Endowments but little ministry to support. Institutions but no church to be served by them. Already our institutions are outsized, built for a day when we were larger and younger.

Numerous studies have been conducted on the state of our synod. Demographic analysis is helpful to a degree, but this research too often leaves us feeling helpless in the face of things we cannot control. Are demographic trends inevitable? Is the LCMS merely a sociological product of 19th century German immigration? Are we not more than white, middle class, and conservative? Do we not confess the third article of the Creed? Is not the gospel we proclaim the determinative force, transcending sociological affinity? Demographics declare our demise; the Kingdom of God comes as seed and leaven. The Spirit descends with a rush of wind and God employs weak men and women for the holy endeavor.

Fear tempts us to bend to the consultant's report. Faith's rare vision trusts the narrow path unseen. Such a precipitous moment is precisely when something great is asked of us. Sacrifices of the highest order are required during an earth-altering and turbulent era. Like America's entry into WWII on December 7th, 1941, today the church must be on emergency status. Extraordinary measures are necessary. All hands-on deck. Everyone must be immersed in the effort at every level. Children, women, and men. This demands a mobilization of all our people and resources. Every ounce and inch of us.

Something great is asked of us. Righteous risk. Prodigal expenditure. Every congregation is called upon. Every professional church worker, Concordia University, and seminary. Everyday ordinary Lutherans are called up for extraordinary work. Every endowment leveraged and budget stretched. Every leader asked, "What will you sacrifice?" This era requires such a great and sacrificial expenditure that we will be accused of foolish waste (Matt. 26:7-8). But this is our Lord's way. We have nothing to lose because nothing given to us is really ours. It is our Lord's, and we dare not bury it in the ground.

I have seen the American frontier firsthand. I began my parish ministry in 2005 with a particular focus on youth and young adults. We began to reach a younger, secular generation repopulating urban neighborhoods. We were connecting with a diverse demographic of young professionals and university students.

The American cultural frontier hit me like a punch in the mouth. I graduated from seminary with prideful optimism. This happens when you've been studying the map from the safety of headquarters. Then you sling your backpack over the shoulder and walk into the land, soon lost in the rough terrain of the frontier. Christendom had begun to crumble. I had to be a missionary pastor like Ottmar before me. My task was to translate the timeless confession of faith for the present time.

Two things happened to me within the first couple years of pastoral ministry. First, I was broken. My neat and tidy conception of ministry was actually self-serving. I confess that I viewed ministry as a respectable place where I could construct my identity. I used theology and ministry as a self-justification project, a place to prove my worth. "If I can just be a good pastor. If I can just be a faithful servant. If people recognize me, admire me, respect me . . ."

Underneath my pastoral front was fear. Fear of being irrelevant, fear of failure, and fear of judgment. (It is embarrassing to even write this.) But the very ministry I sought to use as an idol, God used to kill me. When I was no longer a good pastor and I questioned my faithfulness . . . that's when God reasserted my identity in Christ. Apart from anything I can make, do, or prove, "I have been crucified with Christ, and it is no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me" (Gal. 2:20).

A second thing happened early in my ministry. Two words were bestowed. As our church's ministry met younger generations distant from God, we were laboring to convey God's word in what seemed to be a foreign context. I wondered, "Was it easier for Ottmar to bring the gospel to the Ojibwe?"

I met up with a church leader at a coffee shop in St. Louis's Central West End. Jon was an elder and core leader of our fledgling ministry. We were commiserating over coffee about the challenges of the people we were reaching. "Is it even worth it?" I asked. We diagnosed our people. What is their "setting in life?" We both agreed, "It seems like everyone is searching for an identity and a purpose." Over the course of multiple cups of coffee, two words bubbled up as a clear, concise response to the desperate search for these two fundamental longings. "Loved." "Sent."

These two words became God-given guides for our new church plant, and subsequently the larger congregation of which we were a part. They remain watch words for my ministry and a growing network of congregations across our church body. How did they provide a useful paradigm?

- *Loved and Sent are a **shorthand answer for identity and purpose**. Who am I? I am loved by God in Christ, a baptized child redeemed by the blood of the Lamb. What is my purpose? I am sent by God for really important work in vocation and witness, the Great Commandment and Great Commission.*
- *Loved and Sent are **an entry point into our profound profession of faith**. The gospel and mission. Justification and sanctification. Word and Sacrament leading to Christian ministry in daily life. God's work FOR us, and God's work THROUGH us. Receive and Respond.*
- *Loved and Sent are **a theological compass** for Christian life and ministry. The words reflect the two kinds of righteousness. They reflect the essence of our Christian life and worship as we receive God's gifts and respond with works before man.*
- *Loved and Sent are **a ministry guidepost**. They help us make decisions in our church by keeping us focused on the most critical things.*
- *Loved and Sent are **memorable** for all God's people, from 2-year-olds to 92-year-olds. They are simple markers with profound theological meaning. This is helpful for everyday, ordinary Christians.*
- *Loved and Sent are useful in **communicating the faith in modern culture**. They are "bridge words." They are found in Scripture and are common in everyday vernacular.*
- *Loved and Sent are **handles for everyday Christian witness**. They give an easy starting point for conversation in the elevator, sidewalk, school, and workplace. A 6-year-old once told his teacher, "I'm loved by God and sent to you."*

In these two words, God compels us to sacrifice. They urge us to gain by losing, to give all and find in Christ our all in all. They give us confidence and commission for courageous frontier ministry in this challenging era. We have the antidote in digestible form. In an ailing society, the clarity with which we speak the gospel is salve for open wounds.

While modern Americans are frantic for true identity and purpose, our church body is fading into an irrelevant subculture. The LCMS has fewer contact points with a world desperate for what we have. Fewer members, congregations, pastors and church workers, Concordia Universities . . .

This is the precise moment for us to be who we are called to be. We are the Beloved in Christ. "In this is love, not that we have loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins" (1 John 4:10). We are the people of God sent in his Name. "As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you" (John 20:21). Those who are loved and sent in Christ possess a compelling confidence in the face of severe sacrifice.

Loved and Sent:

New Workers, New Generations, New Ministries

Something great is asked of the LCMS. We are the beloved of God in Christ, sent by him into the world. We are loved and sent precisely for earth-altering moments like this. Our Crucified and Risen Lord is already ahead of us. We have everything we need to be God's people in this present moment. God is doing something great in this church we call the LCMS. Something great is asked of us, of you.

Doing ministry in St. Louis keeps me in contact with friends, colleagues, and leaders from across our denomination: 100 former seminary fieldworkers and vicars, District Presidents, pastoral colleagues, leaders of Synod, LCEF, CPH, LHM, etc. I sense a hunger for action, that we might be synod in sacrificial ways.

Synod as an institution has its limitations. The LCMS as an organization has done what it can. The challenge is on the frontline, and the response will come from the battlefield, not headquarters. The ministry experts are in the field. The "hopeful vision" is already occurring . . . in you. Our call is to a multi-congregational movement. To move beyond convention resolutions and toward joint sacrificial action of which we all feel a part.

Our Lord is calling. Our neighbors are desperate. The Beloved in Christ are sent into the world. But I sense little urgency in our church body. Only closure and collapse. From headquarters we get a rosy picture that things are alright in Missouri. This is a denial of the current severity. Let's pull the alarm. This is an urgent moment that calls for an extraordinary effort.

What is it that we would do together? Over the past year I have documented what I hear from colleagues across the country. I notice three common themes: new workers, new generations, and new ministries.

Loved+Sent to Raise Up New Workers (Matt. 9:32)

We are under divine command to pray to the Lord of the Harvest for workers (Matt. 9:32). Many have prayed this prayer earnestly for generations. When we pray for "workers in the harvest," we trust he answers. What if God has already answered this prayer, and we have been unfaithful in our response? What if there are already thousands in our congregations? What if the shortage of workers is not God's silence, but our stinginess? What if the workers are right in front of us and we have prevented their work by making their call dependent on an inaccessible and unaffordable system?

- *Imagine if instead of a shortage of workers, we had an abundance – 30, 60, 100–fold. Pastors, teachers, missionaries, youth workers, directors of worship, lay leaders. Imagine if we had enough workers not only to fill vacancies in our Lutheran churches and schools, but an abundance of workers to start new churches and schools. Imagine if we had more than enough workers to not only fill the glass half empty, but to necessitate new glasses to be filled.*
- *Imagine if our seminaries amplified the variety of routes to pastoral ministry so that more men could be ordained and there was a pastor in every LCMS church.*

- *Imagine if we re-discovered the spirit of the “practical seminary” that trained men for the urgent and overwhelming need of the emerging American context. In addition to fine residential formation, we have a variety of routes to pastoral ministry (SMP, CCM, EIIT, HIT). Imagine if we invested more funding and faculty to include more men and prepare more pastors.*
- *Imagine if our Concordia Universities and seminaries united to build an online school for lay training and certification for the varied and diverse roles in the church - evangelist, teacher, elder, deacon, etc.*

Loved+Sent to Reach New Generations (Gen. 5:1; Ps. 103:17; Eph. 3:21)

Our church body is losing younger generations. Concordia Universities are closing. The number of young people entering church work is in decline. In the LCMS, raising the next generation has always been of highest importance. This is evidenced in our extensive system of preschools, elementary and high schools, universities, seminaries, system of Lutheran camps (NLOMA), and the National Youth Gathering. Many of our great institutions were founded as youth movements. (For example, the Walther League was instrumental in the genesis of Lutheran Laymen's League/LHM).

We are at a critical moment to reach new and emerging generations in our country. The need is urgent in the extreme. We are far removed from the Christendom infrastructure that may have swept up prior generations into the church. New generations are further removed from the church and further engrossed in subcultures and worldviews accessed through technology.

- *Imagine if we are known as one of the youngest church bodies in America. Imagine if our elder generations passed on wisdom, training, faith, and resources so that their children's children would be equipped to carry the gospel in their era. Imagine the drumbeat of Genesis marches on: “These are the generations . . .”*
- *Imagine if instead of closing Concordias, we opened new ones. Imagine if we used our Concordias to amplify how we **equip** and **engage**: equip our young Lutheran leaders for service to the church and world while at the same time engage non-Christian populations with the gospel through their higher education experience.*
- *Imagine if we had national denominational leaders in their 20's. Imagine if we started a national fellowship for young leaders in our church body whereby we train and engage them in real time decision making for the LCMS.*
- *Imagine if every congregation in the LCMS established an “apprentice model” for youth and young adults in their church. Imagine if there was at least one young leader in every church shadowing a pastor, church worker, teacher, or lay leader (as Paul to Timothy). Imagine if we incentivized an internship model as a form of apprenticeship at every level - congregations, districts, RSOs, Synod Inc., schools, etc.*
- *Imagine if we passed on the resources of faithful generations directly to new generations. Concordias, seminaries, schools, and youth movements require extensive resources. Every year the LCMS receives millions in unrestricted bequests (\$20 million in 2024, up from \$10 million in 2023). Imagine if we divested of national programs and staff in order to invest directly in Concordias, scholarships, and District efforts to raise young leaders.*

Loved+Sent to Start New Ministries (John 20:21; Acts 1:8; 30:30–31)

We are a declining denomination, yet our origin story is one of massive expansion. We started churches, schools, missions, and institutions as a response to the needs of people in an emerging United States of America. Extreme measures were taken in order to proclaim the gospel in new places. Sendlinge were deployed from Germany. Native American missions were launched. Pastors and families were sent to frontier territories.

- *Imagine if every LCMS congregation had at least one adult baptism every year. This we pray.*
- *Imagine if we planted 1,000 churches in the next 10 years.*
- *Imagine if we invested the abundant resources of God's people in the mission efforts of those closest to the work. As mentioned before, the LCMS receives millions of dollars in unrestricted bequests every year. Imagine if my grandparents' estate went directly to the frontlines instead of a national office, directly to a church planting congregation instead of a program.*
- *Imagine if a reverse mission movement occurred and worldwide Lutheran church bodies sent us missionaries to reach new people groups in the American mission frontier.*
- *In addition to the Divine Service, imagine if every LCMS congregation was known in their town or neighborhood because of an outward, community-focused ministry.*
- *Imagine if we started new ministry outposts in the hardest to reach communities in our country. Imagine if we deployed people in loving service to the LGBTQ+ community, the Muslim community, secular strongholds, academia, etc.*
- *Imagine if we reclaimed our immigrant roots and reached new people groups to the point where we became known as much for being Congolese or Russian as we are German.*
- *Imagine if the LCMS started or revitalized ministry in the most influential cultural centers in America. As we do in towns across the Midwest, imagine if we had an influential presence in New York, Los Angeles, Silicon Valley, and Washington D.C.*

Something Great is Asked of Us

Something great is asked of us. We are the people of God in Christ, the Beloved who are sent in the name of Jesus. We are local Lutheran congregations on the frontlines. Fundamentally, the LCMS is not a corporate entity. We are "the assembly of all believers among whom the Gospel is preached in its purity and the holy sacraments are administered according to the Gospel" (AC VII). We are a people with a common confession, common mission, and common love for one another, all under our common Lord.

My aim is to prompt holy imagination and sacrificial obedience among fellow leaders and congregations that we might continue to be synod by doing multi-congregational work that emanates from the bottom up. Our rigorous theology leads to vigorous proclamation and courageous sacrifice. We possess all the gifts. The question is: What will you sacrifice? What will you suffer?

I am sure that my hopeful optimism will be ridiculed as naive. With age, I too feel the temptation to deny the miraculous work of the Holy Spirit and trust my own skill and sweat. We need the wild conviction of childlike faith. Seed that multiplies 30, 60, 100-fold. Seas that split. Rocks that cry out. Bones that reassemble as bodies. Word that does not return empty.

Something Great is Asked of Each of Us

Join in a movement of prayer, conversation, and collaboration by visiting lovedsent.org and signing up. You'll receive updates about how you can connect.

As a Lutheran church body, our voice is distinct. We are uniquely qualified to proclaim the gospel at this particular moment. I am immensely hopeful. Those beloved in Christ are sent into the world. The movement of God is already underway. "The Kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matt. 3:2; 4:17). God is calling us to "get in on it." Sacrificial obedience is the appropriate response, not fear or self-interest. Something great is asked . . .

You are **loved** more than you can imagine and **sent** with more purpose than you thought.

Rev. Jeff Cloeter