

# Churches Change, the Word Does Not

An oral history of cross-cultural outreach in the  
Milwaukee Urban Area

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## **Description:**

The viewer will find on the accompanying video tape four interviews conducted with Milwaukee urban pastors regarding their experiences in cross-cultural outreach. These include interviews of Pastor Mark Henrich of Atonement Lutheran Church, Pastor Christian Winkel of Redemption Lutheran Church, Pastor James Skorzewski of St. Marcus Lutheran Church, and Pastor Martin Valleskey of the Milwaukee Hispanic Mission. In addition, the summary below includes information gathered from interviews conducted with Pastor Robert Jensen of Gethsemane Lutheran Church and Pastor Michael Sullivan of Zebaoth Lutheran Church who, due to circumstances, were unable to conduct a recorded interview. These pastors have the deepest thanks of this author for their insights into cross-cultural ministry and its history within their various congregations.

### **Churches Change, the Word Does Not The Precedence for Cross-Cultural Mission Work**

Though our goal is to discuss the current work being conducted in our churches, we would be remiss if we did not consider the Scriptures that serve as the basis for this particular mission work. “Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always even to the very end of the age.” (Matthew 28:19-20). This is perhaps the most often cited passage along with Mark 16:15-16 (“Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation...”) when it comes to cross-cultural outreach and outreach in general. These passages serve to remind us that by no means is cross-cultural outreach a new endeavor or a new command of our time, and yet in a certain sense it is as we will discuss later. The passages cited above in connection with outreach are cited so often that the question may arise whether we lose the significance of them when we consider the work God has commanded us to do: regardless of race, class, culture or ethnicity, we are to preach the good news to all creation.

The sins of the entire world have been paid for by Jesus' blood (cf. John 2:2). And there is no qualification added when Paul reminded Timothy that God "wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth" (1 Tim. 2:4). In fact, the Bible is full of examples of cross-cultural mission work conducted by both willing and less than willing participants. One might look at Jesus speaking to the Samaritan woman at Jacob's well, Philip baptizing the Ethiopian eunuch. Even dating back to the Old Testament, one considers Elijah and the widow of Zarephath, or perhaps Jonah's visit to the Ninevites. One could consider the whole of the Apostle Paul's mission work in contrast with the unwillingness of some among those churches regarding the same (cf. especially Acts 13:42-48). Other examples could be cited, but the point is that cross-cultural outreach has a solid foundation in Scripture both through the words of our Savior and the actions of his people.

But perhaps one last passage should be cited as it will be guiding our thoughts and summarizes thoughts that have been on my mind since the beginning of this interview process: concerning Onesimus, Paul writes to Philemon,

"I am sending him—who is my very heart—back to you... Perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back for good—no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother. He is very dear to me but even dearer to you, both as a man and as a brother in the Lord." (Phil. 12, 15-16).

That changeless Word is the basis for all we do. Though churches can and do change with regard to their membership, the Word that includes us in Christ's family, the Word that makes us all brothers and sisters, the Word that we are to share with all creation never changes.

### **Cross-Cultural Mission Work among Churches in Urban Milwaukee**

For the purposes of this summary, we will concern ourselves mainly with the applications of the lessons we can learn from this history. For the history itself, I refer you to the accompanying video. While it cannot be said that these interviews comprise the whole of the

cross-cultural mission work being conducted in this area, they serve as representative examples of the work that has and continues to be done. Like many events in history, one cannot pinpoint an exact date when this type of outreach began in these various churches. There is the sense that within many of these congregations cross-cultural work has been conducted for decades and yet at the same time that it has been only a more recent endeavor lasting the past couple of years. Perhaps it is more accurate to say that God has been gradually bringing cross-cultural outreach into our congregations' focus over time until we have reached the point we are at today. One could argue that it has been ongoing since the time of the Great Commission. But if we look at the history of Christianity in America, the strong German cultural roots of the Wisconsin Synod, the Norwegian Synod, etc., it is fair to say that in some eras the desire to reach out to all nations and cultures was not absent, but the focus was predominantly on serving the needs of one's own culture.

And perhaps it is little wonder that this is the case. As Pastor Jensen and other pastors have reminded me, we still have a sinful nature to wrestle against. It is a sinful nature that seeks to divide, where Christ unites, a sinful nature that seeks to puff us up above those whom Christ has made our brothers and sisters. It has and will continue to cause problems in the area of cross-cultural outreach as it does in all other areas of Christian living. However, this only further highlights how rich God is to us in his grace as we consider how each of the congregations has been blessed in its work and how God has enabled them to meet and overcome the challenges God has placed before them. Take for example Pastor Jensen's congregation, Gethsemane Lutheran. As its history was not able to be included in the video, it would serve us well to include it here.

Gethsemane Lutheran has been a long-standing congregation in Milwaukee. And like many congregations in Milwaukee its history began in the cultural roots of the blue-collar working class. That portion of Gethsemane's neighborhood identity hasn't changed, but the cultural and ethnic identities have shifted over the years from a dominant Euro-Caucasian background to a significant Hispanic background. The congregation's numbers dwindled as members moved out of the neighborhood and the Lord called still others home to glory. Those that remained saw the growing changes in the neighborhood around them. Some recognized the need and had the desire to reach out to the growing Hispanic community around them, while others were opposed to welcoming a new culture into worship. In more extreme cases, protests to this course of action led to more families leaving the congregation.

Lest the reader get the wrong impression, Gethsemane's history is not unique in this respect regarding cross-cultural outreach in our day or in history in general. Nor does it somehow indicate that Gethsemane was worse off than others. Again we must refer to our earlier point that we all have a sinful nature to contend with. Even during the times of the Apostles and before, the Church wrestled with sharing the message with other cultures (cf. Jonah ch. 1, 4; Acts 13:42-48). I have not yet discovered a church that has not experienced some type of conflict even to the slightest degree in this area. For those members of the church who remained to conduct cross-cultural outreach, it is neither fitting nor proper to call motivation into question. Though some may argue in any of our congregations that cross-cultural outreach has been conducted more often out of necessity than desire, God alone searches the heart. And according to our New Man we instead see God at work using whatever means he intends to accomplish the purpose that he desires.

God never left that congregation, nor does he leave any of our congregations, though at times we may be tempted to wonder and despair that he has when we see numbers dwindling. God continued his work as he had always done and continues to do through his people. With the call of Pastor Jensen in 2001, the congregation was ready to move forward and begin its outreach to the Hispanic community. The challenge became how to do it. The language barrier proved to be the biggest obstacle to reaching them with the Word, and yet God with whom nothing is impossible took that very obstacle and turned it into a great blessing. Beginning roughly in 2002, the congregation began an English as Second Language (ESL) program geared towards the Hispanic community. The program began its first session with 8 volunteers and 6 students. Today, it regularly serves 30-50 students with the help of 15-20 volunteers. The program proved to be a great outreach tool to the Hispanic community that was eager to learn English. The Lord further blessed the congregation with the ability to perform services in Spanish through the regular assistance of Pastors Valleskey and Novelli, as well as various seminary students. The congregation regularly conducts Spanish services with attendance averaging from 30-40 people. Certainly, we see how Christ unites through his Word, where the sinful world would divide. Where we would be tempted to play the "Who's Better?" game, Christ makes us dearly loved brothers and sisters in his name.

Concerning this particular type of cross-cultural outreach there is an additional challenge to be met, one that is in a sense somewhat unique. Again, we refer to the language barrier. This is not a challenge in all cross-cultural outreach endeavors, because in some other cultures a common language is spoken with the culture that is reaching out. But in worship it helps to have a common language. So when reaching out to a culture with a different language, how does one incorporate them into the life of the church? For example, if a congregation holds an English

and a Spanish service, how does the congregation identify itself? Does it view itself as two separate congregations expressing a unity of faith and using the same facilities, but having no other means of interaction because of that cultural barrier? Or does it have the view of itself of one united and undivided congregation? I posed these questions to Pastors Jensen and Valleskey to see what had been done in these congregations. I found that this is still relatively new ground and we may not yet have an answer from our history of experience. A possible solution that has been carried out is the use of bilingual services. Another potential resolution to this challenge of identity may work itself out over time as the younger generation becomes more Americanized. The language used then would perhaps be English while still including the influences of Hispanic culture in the life of the congregation. All these things however are left to the realm of history yet to be written, and as both pastors reminded me only the Holy Spirit knows how God will carry out his purpose in this area.

### **Applications to Cross-Cultural Outreach from Modern History**

By now the reader will have hopefully viewed the accompanying video. And having considered also the work being done at Gethsemane mentioned above, the question presents itself: What have we learned from this history? How has God worked in his Church in this area?

I believe Pastor Sullivan from Zebaoth summed up cross-cultural outreach in a manner simple in its nature, yet profound in its depth. "Cross-cultural ministry is about getting to know the man in front of you." Regardless of culture, regardless of race or class, we have a changeless message of God's forgiveness and love to present to them. Motivated by that love, we should get to know those whom we serve. It is not with the intention of changing the Word and its meaning to fit that culture, but following Pastor Skorzewski's advice taking the best of that culture and the best of our culture and using it in the service of the Word.

In close connection with this, a second point should be noted concerning the history of cross-cultural outreach and our motivation for doing it. The motivation has to be a love for other people rooted in our love for the Savior. I had not considered the danger in this area until Pastor Winkel brought to mind avoiding the temptation to view it simply as the cool thing to do. So easily, the devil could twist our desire to serve other cultures into a numbers game (i.e. how diversified you are compared to others, how many people you have brought in from other cultures, etc.). That temptation will always be there regardless of whether it is cross-cultural outreach or regular outreach. The important reminder that needs to be kept is that we are charged to take this message and share it with other people including people of other cultures. In other words, we bear the message of the Savior to them not simply because they are different culture, but because Christ tells us to go to all nations and that directive includes them. If we lose focus on that, then bringing other cultures into the church risks becoming a matter of curiosity, a point-and-look-at-the-different-people-in-our-church mentality. All that accomplishes is taking a problem outside of the church and bringing it inside the church. Instead we should be fostering respect in our churches and the brotherly love that exists between us because of Christ.

Thirdly, remember that you are a culture. Culture does not always mean a difference in race, or ethnicity, but cultural differences seem to strike us more when race or ethnicity are involved. You may not always see eye to eye with a person of another culture, but that does not mean that one is inferior or superior to another. It does not mean that one is right and another is wrong. As Pastor Skorzewski mentioned it does not mean enforcing your cultural norms on another. Those might seem like simple, even obvious, points. And yet so often they are neglected for that very reason, people have not stopped to consider how they view another



culture and how another culture might view them. In respect to this particular challenge, Pastor Henrich brought to my attention a solution from the history of his congregation that could prove very useful: the formation of a cross-cultural committee comprised of the different cultures involved. Such a committee serves the purpose of discussing cross-cultural issues as they affect the worship life and ministry of the church so that future mistakes, misunderstandings, and unnecessary challenges might be avoided.

Fourthly, challenges will happen. Pastor Skorzewski noted that he had never known a particular type of ministry where the highs were higher and the lows were lower. Because we live in a sin-filled world, and if history is any indication, our work in this area of ministry may not always be one of forward progress. It may be two steps forward, one step back. The sinful nature may rear its ugly head. The important thing that has been mentioned again and again in interviews is to be willing to move forward, to admit that you don't know everything, and in some cases to admit that you know absolutely nothing. Be willing to learn from your members, or to state it another way from Scripture, "Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up" (1 Cor. 8:1). In cross-cultural outreach it is especially important to approach members not puffed up with your knowledge, but with the love of Christ.

Fifthly, be patient. Cross-cultural outreach does not happen overnight. It may take weeks, months, or more to successfully reach out to another culture with the love of the Savior. There may be the temptation to rush things, to push for results, and to push your members too quickly out of their comfort zone. We resist this temptation when we consider the Lord's promise always to be with (Matt. 28:20) and prosper (Isaiah 55:10-11) his Church.

Finally, presented here and in the video is a history of what some churches have done and are doing. This does not mean that it is an all-inclusive list of what might be done. In

considering what these congregations have done, we do not dare risk using this history to focus all of our attention only on what works or what gets the job done. Such a view could easily lead us into the temptation of the Church Growth Movement where increased numbers in membership become the sole focus. In that scenario, churches change at the expense of the Word. That being said, we dare not ignore this history either. Otherwise of what benefit would history be to Christ and his Church? We should judiciously consider what these churches have done in order to benefit from their experiences.

### **Philemon Revisited**

Did Philemon and Onesimus come from different races or ethnicities? The Bible does not give us background in that regard, but we can certainly say they were from different cultures. Onesimus was a slave and Philemon a slave-owner. Yet Paul described him as his very heart (Phil. 12) and encouraged Philemon to have that same love for him. Consider Paul's words. Nothing reflects an attitude of pity or superiority in regard to Onesimus. All that is reflected is a genuine love, regardless of race, regardless of class. That is the love given us by our Savior.

In our churches today, we witness that same love being expressed. It isn't perfect and neither was Paul's. We continually wrestle with that sinful nature that desires to divide and puff up. Yet in Christ that love is made perfect.

The church in Paul's day was changing. More and more the focus was being placed on taking the Word to the Gentiles. There was resistance to that change: deep-seated racial hatred and a desire to be not only God's chosen people, but God's exclusive people. Those challenges were met and overcome with the power of the Word and the love of Christ.

In our society today, we see churches continually changing as the neighborhood around them changes. And we are painfully aware that the same challenges of racial hatred and cultural

exclusivity exist today as they did in Paul's. And yet we hold in our hands the unchanging beauty of the unchanging Word.

The wonderful glory we see in Christ's forgiveness won for us on the cross reveals to us that we are at peace not only with God, but also with our fellow man. That is the beauty found in cross-cultural outreach and in all types of outreach. Where sin divides, Christ's love unites. Where sin leads us to say "I'm better", Christ leads us to say "My brother". That is a love that transcended the cultural barriers between Onesimus and Paul. That is a love which we witness today overcoming cultural barriers and replacing division with unity. Churches change, but the Word does not. "Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always even to the very end of the age." (Matthew 28:19-20).