

Bringing the Gospel to North American Cities

E. Allen Sorum

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Missiology is both "the study of the activity of the Triune God throughout the world in behalf of the salvation of mankind" and "the study of the activity of the church of Jesus Christ in carrying out its Lord's commission to disciple all nations."¹ Our church body traditionally has not made missiology a separate focus of study in theology because it wishes "to underscore the principle that this first commission of the Lord to his Church (Mat 28:16-20) be a part of all its theological teaching."²

If space allowed, we would focus on the activity of our Triune God throughout the world in behalf of the salvation of mankind. For our purposes here, we will assume that the reader is familiar with Scripture's exposition of that topic and content ourselves to apply God's interest in the salvation of the world to that portion of mankind that lives in North American cities. This focus is necessary for two reasons.

First, we should apply a theology of missions to our North American cities because the majority of North America's population lives in highly urbanized areas. By the year 2000, the United Nations predicts that 80.8% of North America's population will live in urban areas of 20,000 or more.³ This radical reversal of hometown environment has happened faster than our continent's governments have been able to manage. Not surprisingly, therefore, this breakneck growth rate of urban population centers has happened faster than our own church body—or any North American church body—has been able to manage comfortably.

A second reason for applying a theology of missions to North American cities is that everything indicates that the urbanization of our continent and the world is not just past history but will continue unabated. We will be unable to put off much longer our wrestling with the uncomfortable implications of doing and being God's church in the city. But this issue is about more than just the raw numbers of urban dwellers. The issue before us presents an urgent opportunity to reach the lost. The majority of people living in and moving into cities are either non-Christian or anti-Christian. Whereas in 1900 68.8% of the world's urban dwellers were Christian, in 1980 they numbered only 46.3%. By 2000, that figure is expected to drop even further to 44.5%.⁴

North American evangelism efforts must address a surging wave of immigrants who come to our borders with no knowledge of Christianity. Moreover, there are the folks who have lived within our borders for generations but have turned their back on historic Christianity. For example, according to an article in the *Seattle Times*, church attendance in that city averages less than 3% of the city's population on Sunday mornings. Meanwhile, Islam is exploding and Mormonism is growing exponentially in urban areas. Because people are still moving to the cities and because our church and the Christian church are still "losing" the cities, that is to say, because the church of Jesus Christ, in carrying out its Lord's commission to make disciples of all nations in

¹Ernst H. Wendland, "An Evaluation of Current Missiology," *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*, Vol. 79, No. 3, Summer 1982, p. 168.

²*Ibid.*, p. 168.

³J. John Palen, *The Urban World*, New York: McGraw-Hill, 1987, p. 4.

⁴David B. Barrett, *World-Class Cities and World Evangelization*, Birmingham, AL: New Hope Publ., 1986, p. 22.

cities, is not sufficiently active, we need to focus carefully on the challenges of doing urban mission work and the challenges of being urban missionaries.

Part 1: The Challenges Facing Christ's Urban Ambassadors

If it is true that we ought to be aggressive in applying Scripture's world-wide missiology to North American cities, then we must address those challenges that have to this point prevented us from aggressively applying God's universal message and ourselves to these cities. In this section we will identify some of these challenges and discuss ways of meeting them in a scriptural way.

Challenge #1: We must openly acknowledge God's commitment to the city.

A couple of summers back, my fishing partner and I were hiking through a beautiful stand of cedar trees on our way to a remote Wisconsin stream. The warm sun and gentle breeze provided an aroma as pleasant as the scenery. "Now this is God's country," my companion exclaimed. For some reason, I felt the need to evaluate and, much to my friend's dismay, comment on his statement. To be sure, God loves the deep woods that he lovingly created for our enjoyment. But why is this plot of land especially God's country? For the most part, this countryside is inhabited by deer, wild turkeys, and, lucky for us, lots of trout that cannot distinguish a #12 Adams dry fly pattern from a real mayfly. Jesus did not shed his blood to redeem wild life. He did not die to reconcile trees to God. Since Jesus did redeem and reconcile the world of sinners to God, would it not be more appropriate to speak of Milwaukee's inner city, where we both were serving congregations, as "God's country" because the inner city has almost as many precious souls buzzing around as this countryside had mosquitoes? Does not God look upon a city full of precious human souls with infinitely more tenderness and concern than even the most beautiful picnic site?

Let us be careful not to impose our own preference for the quiet, desolate countryside on the Word of our God! Nowhere does Scripture state such a preference. Nowhere does Scripture even hint at a prejudicial disposition for people who choose a rural environment over an urban one. God in Scripture has in fact clearly stated his deep concern for city dwellers.

God, for example, supported Abraham's concern for Sodom and Gomorrah and promised, "For the sake of ten, I will not destroy it" (Gen 18:32). True, ten righteous people were not found in Sodom and Gomorrah, and the cities were destroyed. Was this fiery act of judgment not also both an encouragement to Abraham to continue his public worship as a testimony to Gentile cities as well as a warning to every inhabitant in the land to turn away from the wickedness that destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah? God plows with the law in order to prepare the soil of human hearts for the sowing of his gospel!

Not all of God's efforts to save a city met with such dismal results. God called—and re-called—an unwilling Jonah to take a message of repentance to the great city of Nineveh. After Jonah finally preached that message, he sat on the side of a hill to mourn the power of God's Word that brought this city to its knees and to God. God's specific question to Jonah implies that all of God's ambassadors ought to share God's concerns: "But Nineveh has more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left, and many cattle as well. Should I not be concerned about that great city?" (4:11) What makes a city great in the eyes of God? Is it not primarily the sheer numbers of citizens who face eternal damnation unless they hear God's invitation to enjoy the gift of salvation and believe it? Is the power of God's Word not amazing? One does not need to be a willing urban ambassador in order to be an extremely powerful urban ambassador when he is equipped with God's law and gospel. There is hope!

What is more, Scripture describes cities as a blessing from God. Psalm 107 offers praise to the God who rescued his people from hunger, thirst, and wandering in the desert wastelands. God demonstrates his mercy by providing these desert wanderers with a "city of habitation" (verses 4, 7, 36) as the solution to their troubles. Both Moses and Joshua told their flock to be thankful for the blessings of the flourishing cities that God would give them though they did not build them (Josh 24:13).

We can also see God's concern for cities simply by keeping track of the places Jesus, the apostles, and Paul traveled in their ministry of plowing with the law, sowing the gospel, and reaping a church of believers by the Spirit. They retreated to the wilderness to refresh themselves, but they returned to the cities to proclaim Christ.

God's mission to plow, sow, and thresh is a world-wide mission. The city is a part of the whole world. We must consider the city in our mission plans because cities increasingly hold the largest percentage of the world's population. God's commitment to the cities of every era, in every part of the world, inhabited by every nation, tribe, and tongue must be acknowledged in Jesus' command, "Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation" (Mk 16:15). The universality of the command requires us to go to the city and preach the good news to all of its inhabitants.

The greatest comfort and assurance we can give to the individual sinner is the fact that Jesus Christ reconciled the whole world to God, redeeming the whole world with his blood. Since every sinner is most certainly part of this redeemed world, then that individual sinner is most certainly redeemed by Christ and washed by his blood. This same logic applies to our discussion of the city. God proved his commitment to the whole world and demonstrated his love for the whole world by sending Jesus Christ into the world to save all sinners. So also, Jesus Christ commissioned his church and commanded his church to go into the whole world and preach to all creation. This requires us as a church body, when we are setting aside resources and drawing up strategic outreach plans, to consider every part of the world, including the great cities. This is our mission.

How can Jesus expect this of us? May we not with a clear conscience insist that there are some parts of the world, even if it is only minutes away by freeway, that we need not feel compelled to plow, sow, and thresh in? St. Paul's fervor for world-wide mission and for urban mission provides the only possible answer to our question:

As the Scripture says, "Anyone who trusts in him will never be put to shame." For there is no difference between Jew and Gentile—the same Lord is lord of all and richly blesses all who call on him, for, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can they preach unless they are sent? As it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!" (Rom 10:11-15).

Challenge #2: *We need to learn how to do mission work in urban environments.*⁵

Why does the WELS have a limited presence in North American cities in spite of the fact that we have been proclaiming Christ as a church body for 150 years? The writer of our synod's first published history gives us a reasonable answer to this question:

⁵The original thesis included a lengthy section on the use of our Lutheran elementary schools as important urban mission tools. This section has recently been published separately in *The Lutheran Educator* (Feb., 1997).

It is a characteristic of the early development of Synod that the congregations at new locations were not gathered by ministers but that the people themselves banded together in order to procure preachers and teachers.⁶

Who were these people and where were they banding together? These people were German immigrants who had moved into Wisconsin to carve farms out of the undeveloped frontier. Our church body has deep rural roots. Our early rural heritage is borne out in the fact that one-third of our congregations are still located in what may be called farming communities.

Our church body engaged in an aggressive effort to start new churches from the mid-sixties into the eighties of this century. These new churches were by and large started in growing suburbs. Our synod's Board for Home Missions reports that "easily 90%" of these new churches were started in the suburbs. Why did our church-planting emphasis shift to the suburbs? As German immigrants were responsible for our growth in rural communities, so our people moving to the suburbs determined our growth in the suburbs. This is a generalization, of course. Our Board for Home Missions did start churches in growing suburbs where we did not have core groups of WELS members calling for congregations to serve them. In the early years of our mission expansion, however, we typically started new churches in those suburbs where our people had banded together and had requested services.

We may argue, therefore, that we do not know how to do mission work in the city. An emphasis on urban mission has not been part of our history. Therefore we lack experience and knowledge. The disciples, when called upon to carry out Jesus' mission to Judea, Samaria, and the world, no doubt wondered whether they knew how to do mission work at all. The book of Acts, however, records their efforts and reveals their enthusiasm to learn mission work by doing mission work! They forged ahead in spite of their lack of experience and knowledge. They worked through issues familiar to urban residents today like poverty (Acts 2:44,45, 4:32), prejudiced police (4:1-31, 16:16-40), cultural friction (10:28,29, 15:19-21), and food distribution injustices (6:1-7). The apostles made their way through an intimidating unknown because they had been sent into the world to make disciples.

In prayer to his heavenly Father, Jesus said, "As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world" (Jn 17:18). The apostles went into the world willingly, though probably lacking many skills related to organizing churches, because their Lord had sent them. The Savior, who walked with them, taught them, obeyed the law for them, suffered hell for them, died for them, and rose again to prove his redemption of them, had sent them into the world. What the apostles lacked in experience and organizational skills they made up for in gratitude and determination. Their Savior sent them. They went. When their mission work became dangerous or extremely difficult, Jesus was there to assist, guide, and encourage them. At the time he sent them, Jesus promised that he would be there for them: "Surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age" (Mt 28:20).

Jesus sent his apostles into the world. So his apostles went into the cities and rural populations of the world. They evangelized their fellow Jews. They crossed mountain passes and seas to evangelize Gentiles whose culture they did not understand. What they lacked in experience and knowledge they made up for in their gratitude to their Savior and in their determination to carry out his mission.

Jesus did not commission only one generation of disciples to go into the world. Jesus commissioned every generation of disciples to go into the world. He sends us now as the Father sent Jesus. Our target is still

⁶John P. Koehler, *The History of the Wisconsin Synod*, Sauk Rapids, MN: Sentinel Printing Co., 1981, p.64.

the world. Because our concept of a world-wide mission is so narrow, we might ask, "Must we go into the whole world?" Because we are timid, we might ask, "Must we cross the dangerous urban passes between mountains of towering buildings and sail through uncharted seas of urban blight and poverty?" Because we are afraid of failure, we might ask, "Must we undertake this urban ministry even though we do not know how to do it and surely do not feel comfortable doing it?" The answer to all these very human questions is one divine commission: "Go!" We will go because it is our Savior who sends us. The Savior who lived for us and died for us and rose again to prove that we have been reconciled to God does indeed send us into all the world. So we will go into all the world. What we lack now in knowledge and experience we will make up for in gratitude and determination.

What we really must know we already know! We know how to plow with God's law. We know how to sow the gospel of free forgiveness through Christ. We know that the Spirit will thresh out a church by the power of the gospel. What we do not know we can quickly learn.

What we do need to learn is how to study the culture of those whose culture is so different from ours. We need to learn how to communicate across cultures so that we can plow precisely with the law. We need to learn to communicate across cultures so that when we sow the gospel, we can be sure that our preaching is being understood in the way God intends it to be understood. We can be confident that the Spirit will bless our preaching of law and gospel with a threshing out of believers.

We need to learn how to rely on these new converts from different cultures to guide us in our efforts to establish congregations in their midst. There is much we can learn from books on different cultures and much we can learn from books on cross-cultural communication. These books, however, cannot provide what we really need to learn that would help us raise up self-sufficient congregations that fit in an urban area in which we have not lived and among cultures in which we were not raised. We need to learn how to learn from those who alone can teach us how to serve in these areas.

In a council meeting with the leaders of Garden Homes Lutheran Church, I expressed frustration with the fact that we were losing many adult converts to the streets. I stressed that I did not know what more we could do and that I did not understand exactly what the problem was. I indicated that I needed help and guidance, as well as support, from the black men whom God raised up to lead Garden Homes. After this meeting one of our black councilmen thanked me for admitting that I did not know everything, but in fact needed him to teach me and to work with me so that our church could make it in our urban environment. I do not like to admit my limitations any more than most preachers. I have learned, however, that asking my black leaders for instruction not only gets the job done, it also gains their appreciation and respect. We must learn how to learn from those who alone can teach us.

I am not suggesting that the challenge before us is merely a challenge to study cultural anthropology and cross-cultural communication theory. Really, the challenge before us is to apply our great Reformation heritage and our Lutheran body of doctrine to our commitment to reach North American cities for Christ and to establish congregations in these cities. In order to do this, to learn how to do this, we need to recommit ourselves to what we have already committed to, namely:

Preaching sin and grace. A primary emphasis at our seminary has always been to train the students to be good preachers. What makes preaching good? Good preaching is that which is true according to Scripture and that which is applied properly to the needs, hurts, sins, and questions of the hearers! Our seminarians pursue a formal study of homiletics in which they learn how to take biblical exegesis and craft it into a sermon that communicates clearly and effectively to their own ethnic group. In the same way, urban and cross-cultural missionaries need training in cultural anthropology and communication theory so they can learn how to

communicate the eternal truths of the gospel in the most meaningful way to people from different cultures. Some missionaries might do well to get formal training in a classroom situation. Most, however, could get this training from personal reading, from a mentor missionary with experience in cross-cultural work, and from the people of the culture he is serving as a missionary.

The doctrine of the universal priesthood. The task of the pastors and teachers whom Jesus sends out is "to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up" (Eph 4:12). As Lutherans true to our Reformation heritage, we intend to make "foreigners" not only objects of our ministry but also partners in Jesus' ministry, which is to reach the lost and to nurture believers. As we learn to be partners with those who have lived their lives in an urban context and who have been raised in a different culture, we will only continue to be true to our confessional Lutheran heritage.

The doctrine regarding Christian freedom. The Augsburg Confession states that traditions which are "profitable unto tranquillity and good order" ought to be observed. On the other hand, any traditions that are "opposed to the Gospel" must be rejected (Article XV, "Of Ecclesiastical Usages," paragraph 1). Paul taught this truth to Peter when Peter forgot the vision God had given him in Acts 10. Peter succumbed to the pressures of the Judaizers and, though he lived and ate like a Gentile, he forced Gentiles to eat and live like Jews (Gal 2:11-21). We must be flexible in terms of worship styles, the way we organize a congregation, and the genre of music we sing in worship services as we gather in members from another culture. We must be careful not to impose one culture's preferences upon another culture when those preferences are adiaphora. Rather, we must remember the spirit and intent of St. Paul: "I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some. I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings" (1 Cor 9:22,23). Again, the urban missionary's best resources for guidance in these issues of Christian freedom are the people—his partners—in the area and from the ethnic groups he is serving.

Challenge #3: *We need to overcome widely held stereotypes about the city.*

A WELS member works in a neighborhood shop where I regularly do business. Years ago he used to live and attend church within blocks of this store. Now he lives and worships in a distant northern suburb, but he still works on this tough, rundown street on Milwaukee's north side. Invariably when I come in and business is slow, this gentleman wants to know whether I have had any calls to serve another congregation. He cannot understand why "the synod has held me back" in the inner city congregation that I have been serving for over a decade.

When basketball teams and their fans from outlying areas come to our inner city gym for a game, I can see the fear on their faces. I have seen moms and dads herd their children in close formation from their cars to our gym and back again. The parents' heads turn left and right watching for possible threats as they hurry to their cars. On at least one occasion, a visiting team rented a bus to bring their team and fans to our gym in an effort to protect cars and human life from attack.

The fear people who do not live in the city exhibit toward the people who do is real and very intense. I feel sympathy for the people who have this fear. I also have sympathy for those who are the unintentioned and undeserving objects of this fear. I'm referring to the Christians in our congregation and to the neighbors who live around our congregation. A friend of mine who lives in a quiet little town in the cornfields illustrated the harm done to the many good people who are members of our church and who live around our church when he said, "I would love to come and visit your church but I would be scared to death to get out of my car!"

I am occasionally invited to preach for sister WELS congregations to talk about the multi-cultural nature of the ministry at Garden Homes Lutheran Church. I enjoy these opportunities to tell my WELS brothers and

sisters about the joys and excitement of working in the city of Milwaukee. I speak in positive, upbeat terms about what God is doing for us and through us. The vast majority of people in these outlying congregations express sincere appreciation and sensitivity after I have spoken to them. Yet, it seems that there is always one curious church member who has to wonder aloud how I can serve in an environment of drugs, crime, and minority single mothers on welfare.

I share these stories to illustrate aspects of widely held stereotypes about the people who live in the city. The first thing people need to do—especially Christian people—is to learn to distinguish between the judgmental and groundless stereotypes and media-generated fears toward city folk in general and the legitimate fears and concerns. There are some neighborhoods that we would do well to enter only with a trusted and street-wise guide or not at all. In general, however, suburbanites would find many city dwellers, especially inner city dwellers, committed to their neighborhoods, concerned neighbors, law-abiding citizens, and community minded. Suburbanites would also learn that the few who do mess up the 'hood are afflicting the many who are doing their best to dress up the 'hood.

Secondly, we in the WELS need to ask ourselves to what degree we tend to equate the suburbs as a kind of Promised Land and the city as a kind of wilderness? If we tend to think of living in the city as wandering through the wilderness, would we not also, as the Israelites, look forward to escaping its hardships so we could begin the more blessed life in the Promised Land? Why might we compare living in the city proper to wandering in the wilderness? Is it not because we think of the suburbs as the just reward for a hardworking, successful person and we think of the city as a place for people who just have not made it yet? Do not answer too quickly.

I have heard parents describe their plans to build a new house in the suburbs after their last child graduates from the area Lutheran high school in our city. These families have wandered through life in the city. They see their dream land on the horizon. They only have to wait a few more years and then they can join the rest of the wilderness escapees in the suburbs.

My brother in the local shop assumes that I want to be successful. He wants me to be successful. But he will not consider me successful (and thinks I should not consider myself successful) until I receive and accept a call to serve God in the suburbs. Let me state the painfully obvious. People are free to live where they please. Pastors will serve where they feel called to serve. One context is not better than or superior to another context. I am not suggesting that anyone who is living in the suburbs is less spiritual than another Christian who lives in the city. I will suggest that we judge carefully our motivation for preferring the suburbs over the city. This is a spiritual issue and must be approached as such.

The Definition of "Success"

How should a Christian define success? Clearly, our criteria for success ought not to be materialistic. Our criteria for success ought not to include image, what others think of us based on externals. Our criteria for success ought not to include whatever our broader society suggests as marks of success. A Christian's criteria for success looks like this:

So then, men ought to regard us as servants of Christ and as those entrusted with the secret things of God. Now it is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful. I care very little if I am judged by you or by any human court; indeed, I do not even judge myself. My conscience is clear, but that does not make me innocent. It is the Lord who judges me. Therefore judge nothing before the appointed time; wait till the Lord comes. He will bring to light what is

hidden in darkness and will expose the motives of men's hearts. At that time each will receive his praise from God (1 Cor 4:1-5).

Christians who live in the city and pastors who have been or will be called to serve in the city ought not to care about what other people think and how other people, even fellow Christians, define success. Christians "care very little" about what other people think of them, but rather about what God thinks of them. Success, then, should be measured in terms of what God has given us to do—proclaiming his Word, plowing with his law and sowing the gospel where we are or where God is calling us. Based on God's commitment to reach the entire world with the gospel, we should 1) rejoice when God calls workers to the city, 2) encourage pastors and teachers to follow God's call to the city, and 3) if we ourselves were to receive such a call, stand ready to receive it as a divine blessing and opportunity, as are all of God's calls.

It has been my great privilege to know many dedicated Christian laity and clergy who feel a deep commitment to work and live and worship and witness in the city. They are not bothered by secular criteria for measuring success. They are working to understand and live up to God's criteria for success. Success for them is to be a light in their city neighborhood for Jesus Christ, living and serving as witnesses to all around that Jesus is Savior and Lord. Success also includes Christian fruits of faith that result in a neighborhood being a safer, friendlier place to live. All of us, wherever we live, must be careful how we define and then communicate criteria for success. Where we live has nothing to do with success. How we live has everything to do with success.

What About Crime?

Another widely held stereotype about the city has to do with crime. People, especially white people who do not live in the city, are afraid of the city because it appears so dangerous. Fellow WELS Christians who come to visit Garden Homes Lutheran Church from outlying areas get their images of the city from television news. This is unfortunate. Yes, one does take precautions for personal safety in the city just as people who live in the suburbs take precautions. Yes, there are some neighborhoods in the city that anybody, including those who live there, would consider threatening. In general, however, you put an anti-theft device on your car, you put steel storm doors on your home and a little extra lighting around the yard, and you are observant as you get in and out of your car.

People in our neighborhood are very proud of it. We have a number of active block watches and community groups. We enjoy an unusually high percentage of owner-occupied homes. Our church grounds and the yards around our church are well kept. Take a few precautions and come and enjoy our neighborhood! This is also a spiritual issue. Having taken all the appropriate precautions, should we not then trust God who says:

He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High will rest in the shadow of the Almighty. I will say of the Lord, "He is my refuge and my fortress, my God, in whom I trust." You will not fear the terror of night, nor the arrow that flies by day. If you make the Most High your dwelling—even the Lord, who is my refuge—then no harm will befall you, no disaster will come near your tent. For he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways (Ps 91:1,2,5,9-11).

The city has an interesting impact on a Christian. I can certainly say it has had an impact on me. Living in the city where there is a possibility for personal injury makes you do more than take appropriate precautions. It challenges you to take God's promises for real. You have to ask yourself whether you really believe God's promise that he is in the heavens guiding and directing all things for the benefit of his people. You have to ask yourself whether you really believe that God intends to keep his promises to guard and defend us from all evil as we claim that he will do when we confess Luther's explanation of the First Article of the Apostles' Creed.

The city gives Christians the opportunity and the occasion to depend on God daily and completely. The lesson of the wilderness is to learn how to depend on God completely, for everything. In the wilderness, God "tests our hearts" to see if we will obey him when times are tough and to draw us into "every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord" (Deut 8:2-3). These wilderness tests come to all of God's children, regardless of the neighborhood they live in. When we have learned this lesson of the wilderness, namely, to depend on God and to always give due credit to God, then we are ready to enter the real Promised Land. And I am not referring to the suburbs! Either God is our strength and refuge even when we work and live and serve and do ministry in the city, or our God is a liar.

But Isn't the City Packed with Poor People?

Another aspect of urban stereotypes that we need to address is the notion that most folks in the city are poor, on welfare, and members of a minority. This unkind mixture of classism and racism is most assuredly a theological, spiritual issue. The degree to which people in the city are poor and from minority groups does not in any way affect our commitment to the city. God's commitment to mission work is a universal commitment. Our commission to do mission work in the city is a universal commission. If we were not making a commitment to evangelizing the city because there are many poor minorities there, the Holy Spirit would pointedly direct us to such a portion of Scripture as:

Christ's love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again. So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer. Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come! All this is from God (2 Cor 5:14-18).

Along with Paul, WELS Christians will condemn racism and classism. We will also work hard to make sure that racism and classism do not dictate mission policy and distribution of limited mission dollars. Racism and classism are such ugly and obvious sins that we need take no more time and space to condemn them.

The danger of stereotypes about who lives in the city is not merely (or perhaps primarily) racism and classism. First of all, it is just patently untrue that everybody in the city is poor and a minority. The city hosts a wildly diverse population. Even more importantly, hanging on to such stereotypes might lead us to lose sight of the fundamental fact that God made the whole world the target of his free love in Christ. Therefore he has commissioned us to be bearers of that message of love in Christ to the whole world. We may not close our eyes prejudicially to any group living in any area. We may not prejudicially justify insensitivity to the eternal and spiritual needs of any group living in any area. To do so is an affront to the God of universal grace, who in his magnificent mercy included us in that grace.

As a church, we must work in the city not only because God has commanded us to do so. We must work in the city to open up our own eyes to God's grace to us. As we include ourselves in the class of poor sinners, outsiders due to our unrighteousness, a caste of wicked, impure, and immoral degenerates, we then begin to understand and appreciate how marvelous God's grace is to us and for us. Then we will truly understand what Paul was talking about when he said, "Christ's love compels us....So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view" (2 Cor 5:14,16).

When we as individuals and as a church body—as Christ's body—reach this important stage in spiritual maturity, we will willingly endure whatever trials, struggles, and sacrifices are required to undertake a

commitment to doing mission work in the city. Our goal will then be to figure out how many different groups we can reach and how many neighborhoods we can serve and how socioeconomically and culturally diverse a church body we can build for Christ.

Part 2: The Challenge Of Being Christ's Urban Ambassadors

Because our church body's efforts to start new churches has historically not focused on the city proper, and because our church body currently is short on both the confidence and the know-how for planting mission congregations aggressively in the city, and also because of some widely held middle-class stereotypes about the city, it may be a while before we see a grassroots synodical commitment and vision for reaching the city for Christ. Yet because we are convinced that God's missionary concern is a world-wide commitment, and because the city is not only a part of this world, but the fastest growing and most densely populated part of this world, we must work toward such a grassroots synodical commitment and vision to reach the city as well as to develop the strategies necessary to implement the vision.

Though stirring up such a grassroots commitment will be a challenge, the greater challenge belongs to those pastors and teachers who will be called to serve North America's cities. For all the reasons previously mentioned, we have relatively few pastors and teachers now serving within the boundaries of a major city and fewer still who were or are sufficiently prepared for this experience. Most of our pastors and teachers assume that they will serve in the same kind of rural or suburban and largely monocultural context from which they came. Most seminary students view urban ministry in much the same way as oversees ministry—mysterious, a little frightening, and definitely foreign. The idea that they might serve in an urban context strikes them somewhere between novel and highly unlikely.

Yet, in spite of their assumptions and fears, some of our young men and women who have grown up in rural or suburban homes will be called to serve in the city. The city needs their witness, their heart for the lost, and their lives to serve as models of Christian righteousness, servanthood, and family life. When such persons enter the city to begin their preaching or teaching ministry, they will face all the usual struggles of the first years of ministry. If they are experienced workers, they will face the usual struggles of trying to adapt to serving new people in a new place. But because they are new to the city, they will face the additional challenge of adapting to the city's social realities. The challenge that this unfamiliar urban social setting poses to pastors and teachers from a traditional WELS background is unsettling because it hits us where we are most sensitive. This challenge hits us hard in regard to:

1. *our heart*: Am I up to the challenge of serving in the city? Can I handle the pressures? Can I handle the struggle of learning how to do urban mission work? Can I handle the stereotypes that may now affect me as an urban worker?
2. *our vocation*: What is my function in the city as a called worker? I have seen pastors and teachers serve in a rural and suburban context. I know what they do and what is expected of them, and how they are evaluated. I have no idea how my attitudes and assumptions and agendas will need to change regarding ministry in the city because I have never seen or experienced ministry in the city.
3. *our family*: Will my family be safe and happy living in the city? Dare I ask my spouse to venture into the risky proposition of evangelizing a city and raising a family in the city?

Am I Up To The Challenge Of Serving In The City?

I was not given the opportunity to choose whether or not to serve in an inner city. I did not get the chance to wrestle with my faith and my God and my stereotypes and my fears. I was sent into the city on the day divine calls were distributed to my class of seminary seniors. In the first year of my ministry at Garden

Homes, I asked myself countless times whether I was up to the challenges of serving in the city. I learned, and I here assert, that once God gets a pastor or teacher into the city, he begins immediately and aggressively to nurture that servant so that he or she can face the city's challenges with confidence—and much prayer!

I am not suggesting that a pastor or teacher needs a super faith or a superior faith to serve in the city. I will suggest that a called worker does need to search the Scriptures for specific hope and trust and confidence in certain divine promises and for assurance that he or she may not have had to rely on while serving or living in northern Wisconsin. Someone else will assert that workers called to serve in rural or suburban contexts can expect God to nurture and prepare them for the challenges of serving God's people there. I have no doubt that this is true. I do not know what special lessons God wants to teach workers who serve in a rural or suburban community. I believe that I do know some of the special lessons God wants urban workers to learn so that they might enjoy a bold confidence and optimism and sense of security while serving in the city.

The City Teaches Humility

The first lesson God will have an urban worker learn, I believe, is humility. Moses provides a biblical definition of humility in Deuteronomy 8:2-5:

Remember how the Lord your God led you all the way in the desert these forty years, to humble you and to test you in order to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commands. He humbled you, causing you to hunger and then feeding you with manna, which neither you nor your fathers had known, to teach you that man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord. Your clothes did not wear out and your feet did not swell during these forty years. Know then in your heart that as a man disciplines his son, so the Lord your God disciplines you.

Moses was speaking to people who had just spent forty years in the wilderness. His message is just as compelling for people moving into the city. God will send tests to find out what is in our hearts. God's tests will uncover our true attitude toward his commands. He will send trials that will drive us into the Bible. He will preserve us and provide for us during these trials and while we are "wandering" in the city. In so doing, God teaches us to depend on him and not on ourselves, our strength, our intellect, or our cultural or socioeconomic assumptions about what life and ministry ought to be. This biblical understanding of humility, this total dependence on God, is the first faith lesson for an urban worker.

During the years I have served Garden Homes Lutheran Church, God has allowed me and my family to taste several different flavors of urban crime. The people I served were very interested in my reactions to these challenges. They were truly sympathetic toward me and concerned about me. Yet they needed to know whether I would suddenly lose my commitment to Garden Homes Lutheran Church and to the city. They needed to know whether I would become bitter and hateful toward all minorities and categorize all minorities because I had been victimized by a few. They needed to know whether I would serve Garden Homes with continued optimism and confidence or succumb to self-pity. They needed to know whether I could handle the same kinds of tests many of them have handled. They needed to know whether I could stand up to Satan's efforts to attack our gospel ministry. They needed to know whether I really wanted to serve Garden Homes. And all that they wanted to know, I really wanted to know for myself.

Tests such as these are necessary so that what so easily comes out of our mouths is also a deeply held conviction of our hearts. I do believe that God is in complete control of the entire universe. I believe that God does protect me, my family, and every Christian from harm and danger. I believe that when God allows harm into my life, he is disciplining me as a son so that in the end it might go well with me, as Moses promises in

Deuteronomy 8:16. These kinds of tests drive the urban worker to Scripture with a whole new hunger for strength and answers. Our approach to Scripture will not be a professional obligation but a personal lifeline to hope and meaning, strength and wisdom, peace and security. The city will quickly uncover our motivations in serving as pastors or teachers. The city will give us the opportunity to learn soon whether we really believe in God's providence and depend on him.

I have learned—as far as humanly possible—to accept these tests for two reasons. First of all, I am reminded of what the writer to the Hebrews said:

In your struggle against sin, you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood. And you have forgotten that word of encouragement that addresses you as sons: "My son, do not make light of the Lord's discipline, and do not lose heart when he rebukes you, because the Lord disciplines those he loves, and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son." Endure hardships as discipline; God is treating you as sons (12:4-7).

As I read through the listing of the heroes of faith in Hebrews 11 and as I consider what these heroes endured to proclaim the gospel, I cannot think of anything that I have endured as an urban mission worker that comes close to their trials.

Secondly, I accept whatever short-term and relatively light tests may come my way as an urban pastor because of the maturity God has produced as a result of previous tests. The tests that I have experienced in the city have taught me things that I am not sure I could have learned elsewhere. For example, I know that the faith God has given me will keep me steadfast in the face of death, for I have looked down the wrong end of a .32 semi-automatic. I know that the faith of each of my family members will be nurtured as mine has been nurtured so that we are all still glad to serve in our city and are not afraid—usually—of living in the city. Our children have had to wrestle with their God and seek answers from him as they have been disciplined and tested and taught humility by God through tests that are unique to an inner city environment. The chief reason I am grateful to God for the opportunities to serve in the city is this: I know for a fact that God is in the heavens, that he is with me always, that everything that happens is for my good and that he will rescue me from every evil attack. My wife and children are learning these lessons along with me and independently.

I have heard missionary families describe their service in a foreign and sometimes dangerous setting in the same way. Urban teachers, pastors, and church members share many correlations with foreign workers. There are pastors and seminarians who dream of being a foreign missionary one day. With access to right information, with exposure to the realities, joys, and challenges of urban ministry, I am sure there will be pastors, teachers, and seminarians who dream of representing God in the city!

The City Teaches Us to Trust God to Be with Us in Carrying Out His Mission

Closely related to this humility before God is a trust that God is with us as we carry out his Great Commission in the city. A critical aspect of the Great Commission is Jesus' promise, "Surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age" (Matthew 28:20).

One winter evening I stopped by to see a woman who had visited three consecutive Sunday services at our church. She lived in a tough neighborhood in a tough apartment complex and wanted me to visit well after dark. I was a bit uneasy as soon as I got out of my car. When I opened the door to her apartment complex, a young woman was sitting on the steps picking up the contents of her purse and cussing out some vanished assailant for trying to steal her purse. This woman's small daughter was at her side. At the top of these same steps I met a man who was apparently looking for the thief. He was angry. I was tense. I did get to the

apartment I was searching for and was met at the door by the woman I had come to visit. As we talked about heaven and how Jesus had provided her with free and unconditional access to that heaven, we heard fighting and intense cursing in the apartments around us.

It seemed odd to be talking about peace and paradise to a person who lives every day in the midst of such turmoil. Yet, this woman deeply appreciated God's offer of hope and peace. She did not hold membership in any church. She had moved a number of times from one city to the next and from one apartment to the next as a result of a difficult divorce. In the meantime, she had ended every evening by gathering her two children around the Bible to read to them from Scripture. She could not verbalize or express just how Jesus had saved her. Nonetheless, she was positive that Jesus had saved her.

She accepted my invitation to attend our adult instruction course with great excitement and expressed her eagerness to complete this course so she could join our "friendly" church. I was so uplifted! Then, she opened the door so I could go. I wanted to say, "Martha, if I don't make it to my car, would you call somebody?" but I did not.

I chuckle at the tension I experienced then and have experienced in similar situations regularly. But when I am in the midst of that kind of tension, I review—no, I cling to—"Surely I am with you." I take all the precautions I can take. I am usually surprised at the kindness I receive from people who are hanging out in situations like this. In fact, as I left the apartment, the large man I met at the top of the stairs on the way in said, "Good night, Pastor!" He had overheard Martha say, "Thanks for stopping by, Pastor Sorum." Many of our church's guests live in very tough neighborhoods and in very tough apartment buildings. When they visit us, either I or our congregation's evangelists visit them. We have not boycotted any neighborhood in Milwaukee. We have never been assaulted or badgered. We have never refused to visit anyone who visited us. But we have been tense on occasion.

I am not suggesting that inner city pastors and teachers be foolhardy. Jesus does "suggest," however, that we deal with our tensions and then get into these homes and apartments to make disciples. He has invited the urban and inner city missionary to count on his presence. This is what we say to our foreign missionary families, is it not? If they are expected to believe and trust Jesus' promise, and if we believe that Jesus is worthy of this trust, can we not also assume that Jesus is trustworthy in our North American cities as well? It is a lesson the urban evangelist learns very early in his spiritual development for service in the city.

The City Teaches Us to Be Servant-Leaders

Another critical lesson that urban teachers and pastors must learn comes under the heading of servanthood. Scripture indicates that all servants of Christ need to learn servanthood (Matthew 10:24-25, 23:8-12, 24:45-51). Any pastor or teacher who does not have a servant's heart is not serving God's people in the way God has called him or her to serve (1 Peter 5:3). But for reasons I will describe here, it is especially important for God's urban, cross cultural workers to be servant-leaders. It is a given that a pastor or teacher serving in an urban context will be in close contact with people from minority cultures. Evangelizing and serving people from minority cultures presents a special challenge to those who have grown up in a majority culture. Members of a majority culture instinctively have the notion that their opinions, assessments, and ideas are inherently accurate. Call it a variation of the "might makes right" mindset. This majority mentality may trick us into thinking that we can identify community needs and create and implement programs to meet these needs even though we have never lived in the diverse community of people who have these needs. The result is that we make these people objects of ministry and neglect also to make them partners in ministry. Even a cursory reading of Ephesians 4:11-16 will show that Jesus does not send pastors or missionaries into a city only to make people objects of ministry.

A pastor who graduates from our seminary has often had four years of intense academic training in one of our preparatory high schools. He has usually had an additional four years of rigorous college training including the study of Greek, Hebrew, German, and Latin. He completes his training with three years of seminary classroom work in exegesis, systematic theology, and church history. The quiet question lurking behind this intense training and our own majority mentality might be crassly stated thus: "What don't I know and if I don't know, what can't I figure out on my own?"

This is in no way a judgment against our academic training. The problem is not with our training. The problem is with our sinful human nature and a majority mentality. Intensive academic preparation coupled with our sinful nature's majority mentality, along with our own culture's assumption that anyone in leadership should have all the answers, could lead us to the wrong conclusion that we already know how to serve everybody in any situation. Once this warning has been stated and accepted, our thoroughly trained pastors and teachers can then accept this fact that before they start offering too many answers to people from a different culture, they must first learn what the questions are. Accept the fact that people from different and minority cultures have a long list of questions that are truly different from the questions we who are in the majority have asked!

Here is a simple and concrete example of how a mentality of servanthood in the heart and mind of an Anglo called worker might look. Upon entering an urban and multicultural mission setting, the Anglo pastor or teacher begins by asking Christian brothers and sisters questions like this:

- What do I need to know about you in order to serve you as a Christian pastor/teacher?
- What are the challenges confronting you that I as a Christian instructor need to understand in order to support you as your pastor or teacher?
- Tell me what special challenges face this church/this community?
- How might a Christian pastor/teacher/congregation address these challenges?
- What are the key questions, sins, and problems that you as a long-time member of this community/culture group would identify so that our Bible classes and sermons might offer immediate and relevant answers, correction, and solutions?
- What limitations do I have as an Anglo evangelist/teacher and how can you help me circumvent them so that we can reach and teach as many people as possible?

Questions like these are difficult for many of us from the majority culture to ask because they assume that we need help. They assume that we do not know everything. They assume that we must rely on our Christian brothers and sisters in this community or culture group that is new to us to help us apply our intense and excellent training with the most accuracy and salutary benefit. Oddly enough, as soon as we admit these things, our brothers and sisters from minority cultures will honor us for our forthright admission that we need them and must rely upon them for the benefit of God's kingdom in their midst.

A mentality of servanthood allows for a partnership that will not only produce blessings for God's kingdom, it will also allow for the development of true mutual respect between the Anglo servant and those whom he or she serves. Our Anglo background has led us to believe that to admit to professional and personal limitations and insufficiencies is to admit to incompetence. When working in a minority culture, admitting to such limitations and asking the guidance of brothers and sisters from that minority culture is the beginning of competence, and it is seen as such by the people being served. Ask a minority person if he or she finds it difficult to communicate with white folks. If they will admit to you that they do sometimes experience this difficulty, ask them to explain why. Assure this person that you really do want to know and that you can handle the truth. Your willingness to ask this question and to listen to the answer is an important test to determine whether you could be competent to serve as a pastor or teacher in the city.

What Is My Function in the City as a Called Worker?

A pastor serving in a monocultural context plays many roles: theological expert, family life trainer, congregational visionary, community evangelist, and church programming authority, among others. To one degree or another, the people this pastor serves see his role in much the same way.

The function of a pastor serving in an urban and multicultural context is in some ways different. Yes, both the pastor in a monocultural situation and the pastor in a multicultural situation must divide the word of truth correctly and apply it appropriately for the flock they have been called to serve. Both are careful to define sin as Scripture defines sin, to confront sin with the law, and to comfort the repentant sinner with the gospel. Both will equip leaders to lead the church. Both will work to nurture the faith of their flock and also encourage their flock to reach out to the lost.

Both would also do well to see their roles more as Paul wanted Titus to see Titus' role. It is absolutely essential, however, for a pastor in an urban, multicultural context to follow Paul's advice to "straighten out what was left unfinished" (1:5). Paul was directing Titus to finish the job of establishing true doctrine and eradicating false doctrine on Crete (1:10-14).

Paul gave Titus three directives by which to accomplish this job. First, Titus was himself to proclaim publicly the true Word and to refute publicly all falsehood (2:1,15). Titus was the local theological expert, God's representative of the truth. As such, his place was before the whole congregation, in the pulpit, so to speak, publicly proclaiming the "grace of God" (1:11) that "teaches us to say 'No' to ungodliness" (1:12).

In an urban context, the pastor must be ready to address publicly the huge variety of sects, false religions, twisted doctrines, sins, and satanic deceptions that are perpetrated in the city, often in the name of God. The people will be confronted constantly by a barrage of "new" teachings and old hedonism due to the city's inherent tolerance for social extremes. The urban congregation is surrounded by nonsense of this type. It must have access from the pulpit and in Bible classes to a divine perspective on whatever lie is currently in vogue.

Secondly, Titus was to organize the believers in Crete by appointing elders and overseers to ensure that this true Word was taught and obeyed in the lives and homes of the individuals (1:5,8,11). Titus could address larger groups through public preaching and teaching, but it would require elders from the local towns working directly with the folks in their homes and neighborhoods to urge them to appropriate, accept, and live by God's truth. Having elders would allow for accountability among the local believers and understanding of the challenges and weaknesses and questions facing the local believers. Elders would also provide the personal support and encouragement for many more weak or tempted believers than Titus could ever help himself.

To be sure, no exact correlation exists between the elders of Crete and the elders of our current North American congregations. The goals that Paul had for the elders of Crete and the goals we might have for the elders in our urban and multicultural congregations should be very similar, however. The urban pastor must realize that though the pulpit is an effective means to educate the congregation, the pulpit does not get into the individual homes and lives of the people. Nor does the pastor have the physical capacity to do this by himself. The urban pastor must make the training of leaders and elders a top priority. These leaders can get into many more homes and lives to make help people understand and live by God's Word. Most of the membership losses we experience at Garden Homes are the result of the streets reclaiming weak or immature Christians. We need more elders to help more young Christians stand up to Satan's attacks and deceit. This will be true for any urban congregation.

Finally, Titus was to organize further Crete's church by teaching Christian roles to various groups (2:1-10). Older men, younger men, older women, mothers, and wives were to receive instruction to help them fulfill their respective roles and responsibilities. In this context, older women were to teach the younger women (2:4-5). Paul recognized the impact spiritually and socially mature women could have on young women in particular and on family life in general. Titus could accomplish much more for family life in terms of Christian faith, unity, and joy by enlisting these older women to train up and support younger women.

An urban pastor will soon find that cross cultural differences in family, raising children, and discipline are nothing less than acute. The urban pastor will serve families in an urban, multicultural context for years before he can begin to understand and to appreciate these differences. The urban pastor would do well to teach and to enlist spiritually and socially mature women to teach younger women because they will know the issues, and they will be able to teach and rebuke appropriately. This will greatly increase the urban pastor's impact by taking the Word of God into many more homes and lives.

In general, the urban pastor will need to preach and teach Bible-based roles and responsibilities for men, women, husbands, wives, mothers, fathers, brothers and sisters, sons and daughters. Suffice it to say that family life in the city, as it is everywhere, is in a crisis state. The future of the church as well as the city rests largely upon a Christian congregation's determination to teach these roles and to hold people accountable to carry them out.

Why is this Titus-like approach especially important in the city? The pastor from an Anglo culture will not and cannot grasp the unique questions, problems, weaknesses, and sins confronting people from another culture as well as someone who is from that other culture. The Anglo pastor in a cross cultural congregation must equip his mature leaders to teach and to exercise authority among their own groups so that the group can be properly and sufficiently served.

Otherwise, a pastor will find himself overwhelmed with evangelism and counseling opportunities that he is not only ill-equipped to handle but also unable to handle because of time constraints. This may also be critical in a monocultural context, but it is much more true in an urban and multicultural context where there is no heritage of faith, no older generation "in the Spirit."

In our church body's foreign fields there is great stress on training local leaders. Our North American urban fields require the same emphasis. Our synod's Board for Ministerial Education has recognized this and established a program to provide materials for leadership training in urban congregations and to help minority students prepare more successfully to enter our theological seminary.

Will My Family Be Safe and Happy Living in the City?

Perhaps the greatest concern Anglo urban pastors and teachers have is the safety and happiness of their families who must live with them in an urban and multicultural context. The key issue is violence in the city. We must deal with this issue honestly and openly. To deny the reality of potential violence to called workers serving in the city benefits no one. On the other hand, if pastors and teachers are convinced that God's angels will protect them overseas, and that their synod will stand by them, is it too much to expect that pastors and teachers can be convinced of the same things if they accept a call to serve in North America's cities, even in an inner city? This to me is the bottom line: Do we believe Jesus when he says, "Go Surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age" (Mt 28:19,20)? Jesus is faithful and reliable. Will we go?

The pastors and teachers who accept Jesus' promises and go into the city will need to learn how to depend on God's angels to keep their families safe. Moreover, they must be very aware of their family's fears and must be able to support their families if there is an incident of crime or violence against the family. In other words, the pastor and teacher must be involved in regular Bible study that specifically addresses concerns of violence. They must communicate strength to their family members and they must also let their family members speak openly about their fears and concerns. The worker's family that feels safe in God's promises and care will provide the worker with a foundation built on Christ, the Chief Cornerstone, without which the worker cannot function.

The worker and his or her family will also need opportunities to know and enjoy their own cultural background. They will need opportunities to enjoy "furloughs" out of the city. They will need rest and recreation outside of the city so that they can return together with renewed energy and commitment to the city. This paragraph merely introduces a key and major issue. We close this issue with an encouragement to our church body: Once we get people into the city, let us do all that we can to make them thrive in the city in terms not only of their work, but also in terms of their social life, family life, and sense of personal security. Then, let us trust God and let us proclaim God in the city.

Anecdotally speaking, the families I know who are serving inner city churches will admit that they take precautions to protect their families. Their emphasis, however, is not on the fear or concerns for their families but rather on the blessings their families have come to enjoy as a result of their calls to inner city churches with multicultural memberships. The benefits of serving a multicultural congregation and community in the city include:

- Developing sensitivity and understanding regarding race issues and relationships;
- Seeing our children grow in a faith that strengthens and equips them to participate in and enjoy this ministry;
- Being exposed to a different culture's expression of faith, joy, and appreciation of Jesus (way of worship, music, fellowship gatherings, attitude toward suffering);
- Cross cultural appreciation of food, customs, and communication;
- Insights into the strengths and weaknesses of our own culture;
- Seeing first-hand the joy and new life that adult converts enjoy, renewing our own appreciation for Jesus and his Word;
- Learning up close and personally about how Satan, the world, and our sinful flesh are serious in their efforts to attack faith and how believers must therefore not take their faith for granted;
- Giving our children a head start in learning how to live in an international, cross cultural nation and how to enjoy this rather than being intimidated by it.

Families in the city need to see a model of what a Christian family is, how it works, how it deals with problems, and how it shows love. Just being a Christian family is an important and exciting role and ministry for the called worker's family in the city.

Conclusion

God is a farmer for souls and he wants to reap a world-wide harvest. God has called his church to go into the whole world to plow with the law, sow with the gospel, and to thresh out a church by the power of the Spirit. God commissioned us to go. Christ's love compels us to go willingly. Christ's promises allow us to go confidently.

Included within the scope of this world-wide mission field are the cities. Carrying out God's Great Commission into the cities does present its own challenges to our church body. Some of these challenges are difficult. But God still wants us to go into the cities of North America. For obedience's sake and for conscience's sake and for the sake of the elect, we need to go.

Perhaps we all can identify with Jonah's turmoil when he was sent into the city of Nineveh. Jonah was angry. That city was evil, full of violence, and the capital city of his nation's most feared enemy. These were not his kind of people. Jonah was not afraid to go. He just didn't want to go because he knew how powerful and effective God's Word is. Jonah did not want to see these people saved.

The irony of Jonah's story is that though he did not want to go to Nineveh, he knew exactly what to do once he got to Nineveh. He walked through the streets plowing and sowing with the Word of God. He got out among the people, met them in the streets, and preached. Just as Jonah suspected, the Word worked. People repented and turned to the Lord for mercy. God in his perfect and universal mercy saved this generation of Ninevites and their city from total destruction. Jonah's ministry was abundantly blessed in spite of Jonah. Such is the power of God's Word even in the mouth of such a prophet!

What if we are afraid to go into our modern cities because we perceive them to be full of violent criminals? What if we are afraid to go into these teeming, growing cities full of so many different peoples representing so many different "foreign" cultures about which we know nothing? What if we hesitate to plow and sow in North America's metropolises because we do not know how to do mission work in this context or because we do not see how we could afford it? Or, what if we do not want to go into these cities with God's Word because it might work—but we do not want it to work? What if we do not want to see these people respond in faith to our preaching and receive salvation? For, after all, these people represent the enemy who are dismantling our tax base, causing upheaval in our public schools, and blighting the evening news with their sordid aggression and crime. In summary, what if we are afraid that evangelizing the city might not work or what if we are afraid that it might, in fact, work very well?

These are unsettling times. We are confronted by unsettling challenges that require unsettling changes. This much remains the same: Jesus lived his perfect life and suffered his innocent death on the cross to redeem from Satan and eternal hell the whole wide world of sinners, of whom I am chief. Jonah's problem was probably not his racism or his fear of a violent city full of Gentiles. Jonah's problem may have been that he did not understand his own great burden of sin and so could not appreciate the grandeur of God's mercy that covered his sin. Is it possible that Jonah did not appreciate his Messiah because somehow, somewhere, he forgot how much he himself needed that Messiah? If we as a church body or as individual pastors or teachers are afraid or unwilling to go into the heart and core of any city, fear and racism may not be our problem either.

God tried to point out to Jonah what Jonah's real problem was. Let me paraphrase the Lord in this fashion: "Jonah, you feel compassion for a silly plant that provided you a spot of shade but you feel nothing for thousands of human souls who will face an everlasting judgment when they die. These many souls are ignorant of the spiritual truths that will save them from that judgment. Should I not be concerned about that great city?"

That question with which God concludes Jonah's book disturbs me. When I get fed up and frustrated, when I start looking for a boat heading out for the calmer suburban seas, when I just do not want to deal with the city, it is this question that puts my life and my call back into perspective. I am a great and wicked sinner. Yet, God has had mercy on me even so and promised to share his glorious, eternal home with me. I am now perfectly, blissfully safe. But what about that great city? Should God not be concerned about urban North America? Should pastors and teachers and the grassroots of the WELS not be concerned with urban North America? Remember, now, what this question is really asking. God's question really asks whether I appreciate

my gracious, merciful Savior and all he did for me enough to take him on the road, uptown and all the way downtown, that all might have the chance to enjoy the free gift of eternal salvation through Jesus Christ. God does not ask rhetorical questions. He is waiting for our answer.