In May 1518, Martin Luther wrote a letter to Pope Leo X to explain his concerns regarding indulgences. The 95 Theses had already been posted and created more of a stir than the author anticipated or intended.

Luther wrote to Pope Leo, "Indulgences began to be preached among us recently. They dared to proclaim the worst, wicked, heretical teachings leading to a most serious scandal. Finally, when I could do nothing else, I decided to give at least some little evidence against them, that is to call their teachings into question and debate. So I published a disputatio list and invited only the more learned men to see if perhaps some might wish to debate with me. Behold, this is the fire with which they complain the whole world is ablaze (italics mine). It is a mystery to me that fate spread only these my theses beyond the others, so that they spread almost to the whole world."

It is not my contention that Luther originated the Ablaze! movement in the LCMS. However, when Luther talks about "the fire" that "spread almost to the whole world," he comes close to the mark intended by initiators of the modern day Ablaze!. Ablaze! is an effort to begin a global mission movement among confessional Lutherans, resulting in the sharing of the Gospel with 100 million people by the 500th anniversary of the Reformation. For Luther and for Ablaze! the main concern was and is to spread the Gospel of God’s free grace, acquired through faith alone, to the whole world.

October 2017 will mark the 500th anniversary of the posting of the 95 Theses, the traditional date for the start of the Reformation. For past anniversaries we have written a new history, or commissioned a new translation. The challenges faced by Lutherans today demand more, and the resources of an international church body like the LCMS provide opportunity for significantly more to happen in response to this important anniversary.

This author was asked by the staff of Issues to address the questions, "What are the origins of Ablaze!? What is the rationale for its development? What are the biblical and theological
foundations of Ablaze!?" Some unkind assumptions have been made, frequently out of ignorance of what Ablaze! is about. As one who has been involved with the movement from the beginning, I am eager to provide answers to the questions posed by Issues.

Origins

In 1998 as the 21st century approached, the staff of the Board for Mission Services began asking the question, "What will our mission work look like as we approach a new millennium?" We were near the end of an effort called "Blueprint for the 90s." Adopted at the 1992 Synod convention, "Blueprint" meant to address the opportunities given to churches in North America and overseas by the large movement of immigrants. What we were asking was "What is next; what is after Blueprint for the 90s?"

In "Blueprint" we had taken up the challenge and opportunity in the 1990s to reach new immigrants to the United States with the Gospel. We set a goal of beginning 1000 new LCMS ministries among immigrants. The final number of new cross-cultural ministries begun was 1011, but we had seen something else happen. The culture of the Synod was changing. LCMS churches were now more eager to reach out to ethnic groups other than their own.

At the end of the nineties we knew that as a church body we had declined from 2.9 million to 2.5 million members. Our financial support for missions did not reflect the resources God has given to members of the Synod. In the new millennium we hoped for an increase in passion and sacrifice by LCMS churches for reaching the lost, those who had never known Jesus as Savior, or who had fallen away from the faith. Could a new initiative help focus LCMS churches on reaching those outside the faith? Could a culture shift occur that would turn LCMS churches outward, to become more passionate about bringing the Gospel to those without faith in Jesus? And we had another concern.

Up until the 1990s LCMS World Mission saw itself as the only entity authorized to carry on mission work overseas. A bylaw gives us the exclusive right to call missionaries outside the United States. But we were becoming "the mission police." As travel and communication technologies improved, individual LCMS members and congregations were coming more into contact with mission needs beyond our borders. In the early nineties, I had a conversation with a former classmate from the 1971 graduating class of Concordia Seminary. He began to tell me how his congregation was helping to build congregations in Kenya. Without thinking, I said to him, "I didn't realize the Board for Missions had work in Kenya." We did not. He replied, "Maybe I shouldn't be telling you this."

The Spirit of Christ was moving in the hearts of LCMS members. When they saw a mission need, they wanted to respond, no matter whether it was in or outside the United States. But LCMS World Mission had few ways to help them respond. So, they just found other opportunities to share the Gospel outside the United States. In one sense we were becoming irrelevant to those we had been called to serve, congregations passionate about mission work.

I had become familiar with this kind of reaction when I served as a district mission executive. Districts and Synod had done a great job of convincing congregations that we, the district, did mission work. We even asked them to send us their "mission money." There was good reason for this—we could do more together than apart. We wanted to act "on behalf of" congregations in their mission efforts; however, too many times we were acting "instead of" congregations. Some LCMS churches came to believe that they were not allowed to be involved in mission work, that they were not supposed to start new churches, and that it was against Synod's policy for them to begin work overseas. As leaders of LCMS World Mission we saw that we had aided and abetted a depletion of mission initiatives in our congregations.

Laity on the Board for Missions understood the challenge. They also believed that a movement in the LCMS to bring missions to a new height would have to be spurred on by laity. To address these issues, the executive director of the Board for Mission Services at the time, Dr. Glenn O'Shoney, was encouraged by missional lay leaders like our board chairman, Butch Almstedt, to pull together a group of mission leaders, lay and clergy, from around the world. With the aid of an outside consultant we began to look at our structure, policies,
and opportunities in the United States and around the world. What we found out was very encouraging. There were open doors in many places. We were eager to begin, but not sure we were ready. There was one looming reality we had to address.

We thought our first need was to begin gathering a monetary offering. The firm Skystone Ryan was engaged to help us think through this project, which at the time we were calling “The Quantum Leap.” The question for Skystone Ryan was “Can we raise $100 million in the LCMS?” The company conducted a survey of LCMS leaders and came back with their answer: Yes, $100 million would be a drop in the bucket for a denomination as wealthy as the LCMS, but first we would have to make clear how the funds would be used. To do that we would have to make clear to our constituents what our mission goals were.

Glenn O’Shoney brought another group together with a second consultant and asked where were the most strategic areas for work to begin. At a strategic planning session on June 30, 2001, we set our first goal—sharing the Gospel with ten million people in five years. By September 17, 2001, we were talking about sharing the Gospel with 100 million people, and at first called this initiative “Shaking the Earth.”

President Al Barry at this time was calling the Synod in its North American mission work to undergo three years of preparation for a new evangelistic initiative, an initiative that would last for at least ten years. An outside consultant was engaged to help us think through issues and conduct studies to help us make informed decisions.

The Rationale

We wanted to look ahead; with Dr. Barry’s encouragement, we did not want this to be just a one- or two-year program, but an intensive effort over the next generation to encourage congregations of the LCMS to see themselves as centers of Gospel ministry. We defined a “generation” as 17 years—and by the fall of 2001 we had set the goal of reaching 100 million people with the Gospel, and beginning 4,000 new missions worldwide by 2017. In fact, in the beginning the reality that 2017 was the 500th anniversary of the Reformation did not occur to us, but when we realized the importance of the date, this only made the initiative more compelling.

How did we arrive at these numbers? Our outside consultant worked with the team put together by Dr. O’Shoney to research current trends in national and international fields. We asked for input from the leaders on these fields; we looked at current numbers and asked for best estimates of how many might be reached with the Gospel if God willed this to happen. One hundred million seemed a stretch, but not unreasonable. To share the Gospel in the United States with 50 million people by 2017, each congregation of the LCMS would have to share the Gospel with just two people per week, not an impossible challenge.

We received similar input for the number of new mission starts. Overseas missionaries sent in their estimates. In the United States we knew that 20 percent of our congregations should be less than 25 years old. Each year we had to begin three percent of the number of current congregations in order to replace those churches that were dying and going out of existence. With approximately 6,000 congregations, that meant each year we should be starting 180 new missions. This was something the LCMS was doing in the 1950s. Between 1950 and 1970 we added 1,350 new congregations. To do this we probably began close to 3,000 new missions. Between 1970 and 1990 we added only 700 new churches.

In fact, the average number of new starts in the LCMS in the 1990s was not 180, but 82. As a result, in 1995 only 15 percent of our churches were less than 25 years old. (Up to this point we have continued the decline. Today only 10 percent of the LCMS churches are less than 25 years old.)

We knew the goals were large. We believed that such large goals could be attained only if God were involved. This would not happen by human effort. We began the Ablaze! initiative with an encouragement for LCMS congregations to spend one million hours in prayer. If the Lord wills, then we will share the Gospel with 100 million people by the 500th anniversary.

One of the criticisms we have heard is that no goals were set for baptisms or confirmations or worship attendance. However, as Lutherans we understood this to be something only the Holy Spirit could determine—“The Spirit...
blows where it will." We trust the Word to do its work. If we had set goals for numbers of baptisms and confirmations, we would have been criticized for trying to manipulate the Spirit. Sometimes you just cannot win.

A Movement

In any event, the concept for the Ablaze! movement and the goals were brought to the 2004 Synod convention. President Kieschnick gave his passionate support. The delegates enthusiastically adopted Ablaze!, and declared that 50 million of the 100 million people with whom the Gospel would be shared should live in the United States, and that 2,000 of the 4,000 new missions we were praying for would be in the U.S.

The new Executive Director of the Board for Mission Services, Dr. Bob Roegner, embraced the Ablaze! goals. The current president of the LCMS, Dr. Gerald Kieschnick, has given this BFMS initiative his unqualified support. We see the same support from an overwhelming number of districts of the LCMS. The enthusiasm of the districts has spawned creativity and courageous plans for district and congregation efforts to address the goals of Ablaze!. Recognized Service Organizations and auxiliaries of the LCMS, universities and seminaries, mission societies, and elementary schools of the LCMS have shown equal initiative and support.

Shortly after last summer’s Synod convention, President Kieschnick and Bob Roegner invited district presidents of the LCMS along with the district mission executives to meet with them and with me in a series of seven clusters around the United States. Thirty-three of the 35 district presidents attended. As a result of those daylong meetings, initial goals were set by 15 districts to share the Gospel with 20.5 million people in the United States and to begin 1,250 new churches. But was Ablaze! just about numerical goals? No. This was a faith effort; we knew that only by the Lord’s blessing could we see the goals achieved. It is like a budget being set; the dollars are not in place, but we pray that the Lord will provide what he knows is needed. One of my seminary professors used to say, “Ore et labore,” work and pray. Work as if everything depended on you, and pray as if everything depended on God.
Two significant policy changes were also involved. First, we believed that LCMS World Mission acting alone was not going to reach 100 million people with the Gospel. We wanted to emphasize the creation of partnerships. We want to find more ways to involve and support LCMS congregations in national and international mission work. Instead of discouraging participation we want to invite greater involvement of churches, mission societies, and individuals. Acting together we can do more for missions than each congregation or each district or the national church body working alone. But this was true not only for work in the United States.

Partnerships in international missions would be just as important to Ablaze! Why would LCMS World Mission send a North American missionary to Uganda when the Lutheran Church of Nigeria could do this more effectively and efficiently? They could send ten missionaries for what it would cost us to send one. We would rather give our support to the Lutheran Church of Nigeria.

The second major shift is to become more strategic. We have to focus our funding on the areas with the most potential. We do not want to be a mile wide and an inch deep. This means that not every mission field overseas is an equal priority. When we brought overseas missionaries back a few years ago, we were making strategic decisions, not just financial decisions. The same is true for the United States. God has given us greater openings for new mission work in some areas than in others. If we are to use our resources wisely, we have to make difficult choices. Where are the areas that are most receptive and most easily supported?

Theological Issues
What about the theology of Ablaze!? In my opinion, Ablaze! provides us with the opportunity to discuss topics that have been in disagreement, at least in “confusion,” in The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. This is a great moment to take time and talk to each other, in love, about issues where there has been disagreement. What issues?

The first issue is the reason why we carry out mission work.

In a sermon preached at Trinity, St. Louis, on the Twelfth Sunday after Trinity, 1842, C.F.W. Walther said, “The holy desire to bring souls to Christ begins immediately, as soon as the light of true faith comes into a person’s soul bringing with it the fire of true love for others. This holy desire is inseparable from a true faith. Whoever has no desire to bring someone else to the knowledge of the saving Gospel has certainly not yet come to know the heavenly power himself.” The motive, the reason we do mission work, is love, love for a world that is dying without Christ.

A second issue is urgency. There is no salvation outside of Christ. In the same sermon Walther reminds us of Martin Luther’s concern: “Luther has rightly said, ‘When a Christian begins to know Christ as his Lord and Savior, through whom he has been rescued from death, his heart becomes thoroughly godly, so that he is willing to help anyone. He knows no higher joy than knowing Christ. Therefore, he goes out to teach and warn the others; he gives praise and declares his praise before anyone; he prays and tells others that they also must come to this grace. This disquieted spirit lives in the most peaceful place of all, that is, in God’s grace and peace. Nevertheless, this spirit cannot yet be still, but continuously struggles and strives as if it lived for this alone—to bring God’s praise and glory to other people.’”

Another issue is the nature of the church itself. Some years back I wrote a small book called Apostolic Church: One, Holy, Catholic and Missionary. The point was that the Greek word “apostolic” connotes both “orthodox” and “missionary.” In the third article of the Creed of Nicea we confess, “We believe in one, holy, catholic and apostolic church.” For the framers of the creed, “apostolic” certainly meant preservation of the true faith. This has been the primary connotation of the word in our day. But there is more.

The apostles in their day were first of all missionaries. There were Jewish apostles: Jesus did not invent the concept “apostle.” And, there were Jewish missionaries. The rabbi Gamaliel (the teacher of St. Paul) was a leader in the Jewish missionary endeavor. However, no Jewish missionary was ever called an “apostle,”
but this is exactly what was new about Jesus’ apostles. They were sent around the world with his commission, sharing the Gospel, raising up indigenous leaders and planting churches. Somewhere along the way we lost the “missionary” meaning of “apostolic.” What a difference it would make if in our confession of the creed we would say, “We believe in one, holy, catholic and missionary church.”

Another issue that Ablaze! hoped to address was that every Christian is, by baptism, a missionary, a “sent one.” One of the major themes of Ablaze! is taken from 1 Peter 2:9, “But you are a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.” This was not spoken only to pastors. Every Christian is not only authorized but also required, as a result of whom they are, to share the Good News of God’s love with friends, co-workers and neighbors. Pastors are authorized for public ministry of the Word; this cannot preclude the community of all the baptized telling the story of God’s love to those around them in non-public settings.

There is also the issue of what it means to be faithful. Fourteen years ago I shared my first update with NAME, the North American Mission Executives of the LCMS. I had just become the North America Director for LCMS World Mission, and wanted to set an initiating, law/gospel, scriptural-confessional tone for the work ahead. The title of my presentation was “Aspirations of a Fourth Steward.” Basically, I wanted to speak about Jesus’ understanding of faithfulness as he put it on the line to the disciples in Matthew 25:14 and following. You remember the parable—a man goes on a journey and leaves his three servants in charge. To one he gave five “talents,” to one two talents, and to the last one talent. When he returned, he asked them for an accounting. The first came forward and gave back the original talents, plus five more. He had doubled his Lord’s property. The second did the same. To each of these the man says, “Well done, good and faithful servant.” The last servant came forward and returned only what he had been given, with no increase. The Lord’s response is, “You wicked and lazy servant.” The third steward is then sent into “outer darkness.”

Notice, in the text the man does not say, “Well done, good and successful servant.” He says “faithful.” The fourth steward is the one to whom the Lord gives a talent—he takes the talent and buys good seed, and puts the good seed in good ground. But then the rains do not come—and the crop is lost. What would the Lord say to this fourth steward? I believe he would say, “Well done, good and faithful servant.” The faithful servant is committed to doing the Lord’s work and to living in the Lord’s forgiveness.

President Kieschnick in his first inaugural address told us:

“In 1970 the LCMS had 2.8 million members. Today it is under 2.6 million. In the same period attendance has dropped from 1.14 million to 960,000. Annually, 35 percent of LCMS churches do not baptize or confirm a single adult.”

In that light it might be fair to ask if this is the work of a first, second, or third steward. Is The Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod being faithful? Of course, in the end what matters is that the Lord Jesus was faithful, far more faithful than we could ever be. God counts Jesus’ faithfulness in place of our unfaithfulness. But repentance means a change of heart and actions. Out of love we want to bring more people to Christ.

Something else we need to talk about is the nature of the mission. For some among us it is basically to preach the Gospel and celebrate the sacraments. That is it. However, the mission statement of The Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod says, “In grateful response to the grace of God, empowered by the Spirit through Word and sacrament, it is the mission of The Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod to vigorously make known the love of Christ, in word and deed, in our churches, our communities and our world.” Word and sacrament are not ends in themselves—they are means. The end is the making of disciples, more disciples, and more mature disciples. Again, we need to discuss this.

We need to talk about what it means to be Lutheran. What are a Lutheran church, a Lutheran pastor, and a Lutheran worship service, aside from externals? Lutheran worship at
its core must have everything to do with God’s service to human beings through Word and sacraments, and our response to God’s great love. It must correctly divide law and Gospel. It must see the power inherent in Word and sacraments to do what they intend to do—forgive sin and strengthen faith. And it has to do all of this in ways that communicate on all levels.

A young professor at one of our universities asked me to teach a class for him. I brought up the issue of worship and how it needs to be meaningful to the particular group that is worshiping. He interrupted me and told the class when he put together a worship service he did so in a way that a grandmother could easily worship. My question was, “Whose grandmother?”

**A Long-Term Commitment**

*Ablaze! is not perfect.* We are at the beginning of a twelve-year effort, which I believe is ushering in the golden age of mission work in the LCMS. At no point in our history have we made such a commitment to share the Good News of Christ’s love with so many. But we will learn many things along the way. I pray that ten years from now we are not working in the same way that we are today. *Ablaze!* is helping us learn how to be more faithful in sharing the Gospel.

There is a parable I came across some time ago in a book on strategy, about a young lieutenant of a small Hungarian detachment in the Alps sent on a reconnaissance unit into the icy wilderness. It began to snow. The snow continued for two days, and the unit was lost. “But then,” the lieutenant said, “one of us found a map in his pocket. That calmed us down. We pitched camp, lasted out the snowstorm, and then with the map we discovered our bearings.” It was not until they returned to the camp that they discovered the map was a map of the Pyrenees.

The point of the author of the strategy book was that the map moved the men to do something, to not just sit and wait to die, but to try some things. It gave them an image of where they were and where they needed to go. As they went they learned more, noticed clues, and built on their learnings, until they were able to arrive at their destination.

If *Ablaze!* can help The Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod to “get going,” to “discover some things” about sharing the Good News of God’s love, maybe with our Lord’s grace and guidance we will “set the world *Ablaze!*.” At least we might begin to talk to each other. At best we will talk the Gospel to 100 million people who have never heard it before.

**Notes**

