Russell L. Sommerfeld

How Ablaze! Impacts Culture

Ablaze! in Action

She appeared sad as she walked into the airport gate area. Her eyes were glued to the floor. Upon sitting down, she stared out the window at the incoming planes. The crowd swirled around her, but she didn’t notice them. I detected a tear on her cheek. The public address system interrupted my budding compassion for this sad young person with the command to board the outgoing plane. She disappeared into the line of travelers. When arriving at my seat, there she was seated behind me with an older gentleman and a younger man. I settled into my seat, attempted to engage the couple next to me in conversation, but they declined. Soon I was overhearing a conversation behind me. The older man asked the young lady, “Are you okay? You look so sad.”

With surprising vulnerability she responded, “I have just left an argument with my mom. She is divorced from my dad and living with a man. That’s wrong. And I don’t like him.”

“Are you a Christian? You have strong morals,” the man boldly remarked. By now, I was straining to catch every word.

“Yes, but not much of one. I don’t go to church much. I don’t know the Bible too well. I sometimes go to a church since I have been on my own. But I just haven’t become a part of it.”

The older man’s response was slow and measured, “I pray that you can find fellow Christians with whom you can learn, talk, and pray. It’s hard when parents whom God gives us sin. We can’t accept their sin as okay. But we still love them. God loves us even though we have sinned. You know how he gave Christ Jesus to die and rise to forgive us. He did that for your mom, too. She needs to see her sin and know that it can be confessed to Jesus and that he can move her to change.”

By now the young woman’s words were punctuated with deep emotion, and she said, “I am just so upset. I don’t want her with that man. I want to still love her. I want to tell her God loves her.”

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"You can, and you can pray for God to show her the sin she is in and the forgiveness he can give and the change of life she can have. God can provide. Don’t give up.”

The younger man now spoke up addressing the older man, ”What church are you with? Are you a pastor? Who are you?”

The quiet response was, ”I am a member of a Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod congregation. I am not a pastor.”

I had just heard The Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod movement Ablaze! in action. Ablaze! is sharing the Gospel with individuals—seeds planted in faith—trusting that God will bring about his desired fruit in each of those lives. This movement of Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod Christians sharing one by one their hope in Jesus depends on the Holy Spirit to work the miracle of faith. The challenge is to share the Lord Jesus with 100 million people by the year 2017. One hundred million is a huge number, but compared to the four billion in this world who do not have a relationship with Jesus Christ, it’s just a first step.

Ablaze! in the Culture of the LCMS

What impact will this Ablaze! movement have upon the culture of congregations, schools, and missions of The Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod? In 1965, Concordia Publishing House of St. Louis, Missouri, published a paperback titled The Church of the 21st Century in which the author asked, ”What will the church of the 21st century be like? Will the church die out in America?” He then suggested that there will be a reawakening of a sense of the church. This would involve recognizing that although the church is represented among us as a social institution, it is first and foremost that unique, eternal institution brought into being by the sacrifice of Christ. The church will not worry about keeping its children and youth separate from the social world but will be concerned about rearing them in the nurture and admonition of the Lord. When there is reasonable evidence that they are spiritually able to walk, they will be sent out to infiltrate and to influence. The individual member, young and old, will think of himself as an ambassador of Christ whose responsibility is to find, reach, and win others.¹

Will this prediction in 1965 for the 21st century Christian church become reality for the congregations of The Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod via the Ablaze! movement? Indeed, the church goes through phases. In January 1862 the first president of The Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod, the sainted Dr. C.F.W. Walther, wrote:

…we share the belief of our fathers that the church, like the moon, has its phases, its waning and waxing, and even its eclipses; now in full bloom, now lying in the dust, buried beneath the debris of human teachings and abuses. The age of Moses, when all the nations were moved to exclaim with regard to the church, “Surely this nation is a wise and understanding people” (Deuteronomy 4:6), is always succeeded by the age of Eli, when “the word of the Lord was rare in those days; there was not frequent vision” (1 Samuel 3:1). The blessed times of David, when the Lord builds the walls of Jerusalem, are always followed by Elijah days, when the church’s great desolation moves the few remaining faithful servants to lament, “The people of Israel have forsaken the covenant, thrown down Thy altars, and slain the prophets with the sword; and I, even I only, am left,” so that God must console them by calling attention to his hidden church: “I will leave seven thousand in Israel, all the knees that have not bowed to Baal, and every mouth that has not kissed him” (1 Kings 19:14,18). Periods in which the Word of God grows and the churches are strengthened in the faith (Acts 6:7; 16:5) alternate with periods of apostasy, when people turn their ears away from the truth and wander into myths (2 Thessalonians 2:3; 2 Timothy 4:4).²

Walther’s observation reminds us that the church experiences ebbs and flows of trial and triumph. The current Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod Ablaze! movement can be a time blessed by God for one-to-one witnessing of the forgiveness, hope, and eternal salvation provided by Christ Jesus. And then the Lord can lead his people into and through another
era, be it one of God’s Word abounding in the nations or being rejected by the nations.

We live now in a day of great change in institutions and world views. There is a shift from sameness to differences confronting congregations which, once priding themselves on sameness, are now looking at their unique opportunities to speak of Jesus to those God has brought to their community. While congregations sprout up day by day on the African continent and rural churches are quickly planted in South America, as well as a renewed openness to the Gospel being seen in Asia, a civil spirituality consisting of contradictions has emerged in North America. But the one thread in all circumstances is opportunity for individual Christians to speak to individual human beings about the life, death, resurrection, ascension, and triumphant return of Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. Interjected into divisive social issues, moral dilemmas, ethical struggles, and political polarization are intimate moments between a Christian and a person who desperately needs to hear the Gospel.

Churches as organizations tend to lose their focus on mission and become stagnant over time. The dilemma confronting many congregations today is significant change or slow death. The needed change is at the personal level: Personal transformation is key. The Ablaze! movement of the LCMS is directed at personal transformation by the power of the Holy Spirit at work through Word and sacraments to move individual Christians to engage those God is placing around them. The Ablaze! movement offers individual Christians of LCMS congregations the opportunity to connect the timeless, never-changing truth of Jesus who is the singular Way, Truth, and Life to the context into which God has placed them. This is, at the same time, an old and new challenge for pastors and professional church workers. For they must continue being faithful to the preaching and teaching of the One True Gospel and at the same time guide and prepare individuals to live their lives in witness for the Christ with a sensitivity to their changing neighbors who need the unchanging Jesus.

The Ablaze! movement raises awareness for pastors, church workers, and people to define their community, identify people, find the overlooked, and listen for openings to speak of the Christ so that the Holy Spirit can lead people to confess their sin and receive freeing forgiveness while also confronting death with his resurrected eternal life. This may mean urban Christians speaking of Christ to new immigrants or the poor, small town Christians speaking of Christ to people passing through their communities, and rural people speaking of Jesus to those who have been long-time neighbors but rarely engaged in a relationship or new neighbors escaping the nearby town or city.

Alice Mann in her book, *Can Our Church Live: Redeveloping Congregations in Decline*, encourages entire congregations to ask three questions: 1) Who are we (especially at a faith level)? 2) What are we here for? and 3) Who is our neighbor? The LCMS Ablaze! movement calls for the pastor and church worker to help individual Christians ask similar questions of themselves. This is a time for individual growth in sound learning from the Scriptures via the systematic expression of the Lutheran Confessions for a clear Lutheran Christian identity. Lutheran Christians can offer a clear Law message leading to despair over sin and a Gospel-transforming life focus to a spiritually interested but often confused world of people. This is a time for individuals also to see how the vocation into which God has led them is a great way to demonstrate their dependence upon him as well as to seek opportunities God provides for them to witness their faith in Christ. Finally, it is a time to individually ask, “Who is my neighbor?”

### Partnering with Lutheran Christians from Various Corners of the Globe

The Ablaze! movement also portends to offer further intersections for individual Lutheran Christians from various corners of the globe to not only cross paths but learn from each other what it means to speak of Christ in various contexts. Partner churches have not only committed themselves to the goal of Ablaze!, but are very active in embracing the movement. When The Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod was adopting the goals of Ablaze! in its 2004 Convention, reports of amazing partnerships were already being made. LCMS World Mission has signed
more than 30 formal partnership agreements. Many LCMS districts are partnering. In 2003 the Mid-South District of the LCMS formed a partnership with the East of Lake Victoria Diocese in Tanzania to plant more churches through the establishment of mission training centers. With partnerships in Nigeria, Spain, Russia, Asia, and the Far East come opportunities for individual Christians to partner with fellow Christians from various cultures to touch the lives of individual people around the globe with the saving message of Jesus.

In 1965, the author of *The Church of the 21st Century* concluded his book by observing: “What the church of the 21st century becomes will indeed depend on the Lord of the church and on the Holy Spirit. God has never let his people down though they often have slipped miserably because of themselves. God, who neither slumbers nor sleeps, is more ready to do his part. The big question mark is you and I. We can wiggle and twist and rationalize all we want, but ultimately we cannot avoid our responsibility and accountability to the Lord of the church.”

How the *Ablaze!* movement within The Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod and her partner churches will impact their cultures is in God’s hands as his Spirit works through his Word and sacraments in and through his people, one by one.

**Notes**
