Waking a “Sleeping Giant”

I was first introduced to Ablaze! in the fall of 2003 while serving as a missionary to Japan. The team of missionaries committed to the initiative because we felt that in a country where less than one percent of the population is Christian, hearts needed to be ignited for the Gospel. Our overall goal did not change as a result of this undertaking, but we were inspired by the renewed drive to respond to the Great Commission.

At the time, we were a group of fourteen lay missionaries who had received several crash courses in ministry training. Some of us were two- or three-year veterans in the mission field in Japan while others had just recently arrived. Despite our differing experiences, we were all able to relate as a unified body by responding to the Great Commission. The rationale behind Ablaze! enabled us to establish more concrete goals for our work and our group as a whole. Our small group suddenly had a bolder vision that was backed by the greater LCMS church body.

After hearing about Ablaze! and having gone through the process of establishing goals based on the proposal’s vision and mission, I took a closer look at just what this program would mean for the church as a whole when everyone responds. The thing that stood out for me the most was that the ministry lies in the hands of every single member of the Church. There is absolutely no distinction between called and lay ministers in sharing the Gospel, and there should never have to be such a delineation of authority or ability when it comes to fulfilling God’s command to “go and make disciples.”

While I was in Japan, there were countless barriers to spreading the Gospel to the unreached and the uncommitted, but God showed me a variety of ways to get around them. Part of my determination to do so was my mindset—that I was a missionary. That mindset was easy to achieve because I was in a foreign country for the specific purpose of teaching the Gospel of Christ.

Unfortunately, there are many people in the Lutheran church who feel like a foreign country is the only place to be a missionary. We seem to put foreign missions on a pedestal and stand back in admiration and amazement as seemingly “elevated” lay people travel to various other countries with the sole intention of spreading the Gospel. The problem with this mindset is that our own mission field in the United States is severely neglected by those who have not been called abroad, but are equally empowered by the Holy Spirit to seek out the unreached and uncommitted here at home.

God has called each of us to share in this mission, whether it is in a foreign country or in our backyards. This is not news to anyone, but based on the response of our church as a whole, it is difficult to see that we really believe and apply God’s command to our lives. Ablaze! proposes that each of us deliberately and intentionally act on this call and quite simply guides us in our responses. Every person is capable of responding in at least one of the seven proposed ways, so my question then is, “Why aren’t more people in our church body doing so?”

Billy Graham once commented that the Lutheran church is a “sleeping giant.” I find this statement to be simultaneously complimentary and insulting. We should rejoice that our church body is strong in number and capable of achieving the status of a “giant.” We should also rejoice that we have been blessed through the Holy Spirit who empowers us to act. But we should be concerned that the numbers are dwindling due to our inactivity, lack of motivation, and internal divisions. Ablaze! unites the Church with one common vision and establishes a very bold and attainable goal. I cannot imagine what our world would be like were everyone to dedicate one’s self to only one of the seven mission responses outlined in the proposal. This “sleeping giant” might actually wake up, get the attention of the unreached and uncommitted, and grow the kingdom of heaven.

The vision of Ablaze! is a bold one which challenges us to focus more of our attention on the mission and ministry of the Church. By calling on the priesthood of believers to go out instead of keeping what we know to ourselves and waiting for the unreached and uncommitted to come to us, Ablaze! encourages each member of the Church to answer God’s call. This invitation is definitely a mission opportunity that each of us is capable of undertaking.

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Ablaze! Being Held Accountable for Doctrine and Practice

In discussions about Ablaze!, the opinion sometimes surfaces that this movement, with its numerical targets (as adopted by the 2004 Convention), is somehow new or alien to the Lutheran identity of The Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod. Both advocates and critics of Ablaze! seem to share this assumption of its novelty: The one group sees it as a desirable innovation, and the other group resists it as an unwarranted revolution to introduce something which has been lacking among us, while the other group regards it with suspicion exactly because they
see it as alien to the tradition and theology of the Synod. I can take some pleasure in disagreeing with both camps, because I consider the roots and approach of the *Ablaze!* initiative neither as revolutionary as its fans claim, nor as alien to true Lutheranism as its detractors argue. Viewed in the context of the Synod’s theological history, *Ablaze!* is an example of the Synod’s deep-rooted desire for accountability in evangelical doctrine and practice.

The collective challenge expressed in the *Ablaze!* initiative is rooted in the very existence of our church body. What holds the Missouri Synod together? Why do congregations and individuals join the Synod? When I pose these questions to seminary students studying LCMS history, their initial answers usually point to joint ventures such as a publishing house, world mission programs, and educational institutions for training pastors and teachers. But such pragmatic tasks could just as well have been accomplished by *ad hoc* alliances of interested congregations and individuals, without inventing the whole organizational superstructure of a permanent synodical body. Indeed, in our day the tasks of publishing, missions, and education are increasingly being organized in more decentralized ways that bypass the synodical structures. So the question of why one might want to be part of a Synod turns out to be a very contemporary question, and one that is not satisfactorily answered by pointing to the Concordia University System or appealing to the pension plan.

The seminary students in my classes are often surprised to learn that the Synod’s founders also were motivated by a desire to “defend against schism and sectarianism” and to promote and protect the unity of the church. Why should it be a surprise that the LCMS exists to prevent schism and sectarianism? Perhaps my students have grown up accepting the caricature of the Synod which simply assumes that passionate concern for true doctrine necessarily divides the church into sectarian factions. Such a stereotype of orthodoxy sees doctrine as a kind of centrifugal force in the church, tending always to drive things apart as differences are recognized and emphasized.

The Synod was founded on a very different view of true doctrine as the *centripetal* rather than *centrifugal* force at work in the church, as unifying rather than dividing. The founders of the Synod created an organization based on the daring idea that the church is healthier, more unified, and more vibrant if we are held accountable by others for our preaching, teaching, and practice. It is, of course, important to realize the enormous difference between the desire to be held accountable, and the hunger to be the one holding others accountable, which is just the Old Adam’s lust for power over the other guy. The desire to be held accountable, on the contrary, springs from the knowledge that what divides the church is human sin, including my own sin, which likes to masquerade as my uniquely profound insight and my superior virtue. Knowing this, I desire to be a member of Synod because I know that without my brothers and sisters I am more than likely to twist and pervert God’s truth and go my own way.

What does all this talk of history and accountability have to do with our contemporary debate about the *Ablaze!* initiative? Just this: the goals and targets adopted by the last convention are our most recent expression of that old and noble desire to be held accountable within Synod for our doctrine and practice. We said together at the 2004 Convention that we want our brothers and sisters to help keep an eye not only on the *content* of our preaching, teaching, and confessing in the world, but also on whether we are actually communicating that content to the billions in the world who still lack the saving faith which comes from hearing the word of Christ. I support and welcome the *Ablaze!* targets not because I suppose that I am responsible for converting people, for the Holy Spirit still creates faith when and where he pleases. Rather, I want my life and ministry to be characterized by a ready, clear, insistent sharing of that message because the Spirit works faith “in those who hear the Gospel.” And I want and need the rest of the body of Christ to help hold me to that. That kind of desire for genuinely evangelical accountability is not new, but it does run counter to our radically individualized culture, which may explain some of the screams coming from the Old Adam (in me and others) who likes it better when he answers to no one.

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*Ablaze! In Foreign Fields*

We have seen our share of church-wide programs come and go with questionable results. Yet some programs do make a difference. The vision of igniting a worldwide Lutheran mission movement to share the Gospel with 100 million people is being expressed by the word *Ablaze!* And with it comes an initiative that offers a significant change of focus for us. *Ablaze!* uses the strategies of the first century church which I believe have been lost to much of The Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod (LCMS) today but can be recovered.

In Acts 13:3, the church at Antioch fasted and prayed, placed their hands on Paul and Barnabas, and sent them off. They went to...
Asia Minor to serve, share the Gospel, and build eternal relationships. “From Antioch they sailed back to Antioch, where they had been committed to the grace of God for the work they had now completed. Upon arriving in Antioch, they gathered the church together and reported all that God had done through them and how he had opened the door of faith to the Gentiles” (Acts 14:26–27).

In several journeys, Paul and his partners had successes and failures, but they did the mission. Then as now, the purpose of the church’s preaching and teaching is that Christians love God and care for the spiritual and physical needs of our neighbor. Paul’s words to the Corinthian church remind us that “through us spreads everywhere the fragrance of the knowledge of him. For we are to God the aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing” (2 Corinthians 2:14b–15). Those who know Jesus is risen are now his witnesses to our people” (Acts 13:31th).

The Ablaze! goal is to kindle the spirit of Paul and Barnabas and the first century church to share the Good News with 100 million people by the year 2017. For decades the LCMS has sent missionaries into communities at home and abroad. But in the recent past, support and fervor has waned for sending missionaries by the year 2017. For decades the LCMS World Mission (LCMS WM) is restructuring its outreach to be more focused and confident, receiving increased support from Synod’s board of directors, district presidents, pastors, teachers, schools, individuals, and congregations. This translates into willingness to take a risk and plan more boldly for further expansion.

I now see a new spirit of financial support for foreign missions at the Lutheran Church Extension Fund (LCEF) and the LCMS Foundation. Other financial organizations are also getting on board as they see the potential in the Ablaze! concept. Many joined with World Mission and LCMS World Relief to minister compassionately when the tsunami hit Asia. With the challenging goal of reaching tens of millions for Christ, more organizations are sure to be moved to help.

Second, the foreign fields see the LCMS as recognizing the value of partners in mission. Even in this early stage, Ablaze! has fostered enhanced partnering with Lutheran and Christian bodies with whom we agree doctrinally. Asia has over three billion people, and the vast majority does not know Jesus. We need to work side by side with our partners. LCMS missionaries, now greatly reduced in numbers, understand this is a critical approach for multiplying the ministry to world areas.

Over the past fifty years, LCMS missionaries have fostered nine new Lutheran church bodies in Asia. Through Ablaze! these church bodies are partnering with LCMS in significant ways to share the Good News with millions of people. They have committed their own missionaries to Asian countries, forging new links with LCMS missions, the Concordia universities and seminaries, districts, and local congregations. This can include forming strategic teams of laypersons and professionals in short- and mid-term projects. For example, the Lutheran Church Hong Kong Synod (LCHKS) is teaching, training, and doing humanitarian work in Hong Kong and China. They have also partnered with Concordia University Irvine to prepare Chinese English teachers and support LCMS World Mission tsunami relief in Sri Lanka and Indonesia.

The Church of All Nations, an LCMS congregation in Hong Kong, is a congregational model for Ablaze! These Christians are expanding their already significant mission outreach to China and Vietnam by partnering with Hong Kong International School and LCMS teachers and missionaries. Similar collaborations are emerging in South Korea, Japan, Thailand, Papua New Guinea, Macau, India, Sri Lanka, and other countries of Asia.

A third exciting feature for Ablaze! is Christian education. Lutheran schools are springing up across Asia and becoming a potent force for partnerships, faith communities, outreach strategies, and humanitarian needs. More than 150 Lutheran schools have over 100,000 students and teachers. The nine Asia churches want their schools, universities and seminaries (initiated by our missionaries and partner churches) to collaborate to enhance their educational ministries. They asked LCMS WM to be their partner in making it happen, and the Asia Lutheran Education Association (ALEA) was organized in 2002. ALEA gathered 81 schools in Hong Kong in 2004 where they adopted a six-point plan to energize their ministry of sharing the Gospel. The Christian education partnering concept of Ablaze! adds a potent force for sharing the Good News by equipping tens of thousands of students with the message of who Jesus is and the desire to be his witnesses.
The energy of the church comes from evangelism, service, and sharing Christ's peace with those who do not have it. Were they among us, Paul and Barnabas would be the first to step forward into Asia. Ablaze! is rallying the church back to our roots as a "missionary" church, and at least one of its major efforts is becoming reality: The foreign fields are Ablaze!

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**The Most Challenging Mission of All**

"... I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me." Matthew 25:40.

I remember standing in the bus station as if it were yesterday. I asked three people for help. They all looked at me. "Nie Anglicky." [No English.] I was tired. I hadn't slept or eaten since leaving Berlin nearly a day before.

I was carrying 50 pounds of books to donate to a school to which I'd never been and all my supplies for a several-month-long stay at a third year mission school. Someone was supposed to meet me. No one was there. Another person passed and looked at me as if I were the devil herself. Exhaustion turned to fear. Fear turned to despair. "My God," I thought, "why am I here?" I cried.

I remember the feeling I had hours later when a Slovak man arrived, looked at me, and called me by name... took me to his family... fed me soup... laughed with me... and gave me his daughter's bed. As if my dad were there to tell me it was okay. As if God were physically there. In a few short hours, my entire concept of missions changed. I was the served, and my mission was to learn.

Through my Slovak mission experiences, God allowed me a small window into the lives of the thousands of international persons who dwell among us every day. God taught me to question the notion that mission happens "over there." It can. Yet for most Christians, mission needs to happen right here to the people God brings to us now. And in that, Christ comes both to them and to us.

The lessons I learned those first months in Slovakia seem obvious now. It is hard to live in a foreign place without friends or access to resources. It is lonely when you don't have language skills and most of the people in the country wish you would leave, or worse, don't care that you are there as long as you don't bother them. It is painful to exist where one doesn't understand the routine, the ritual, the food, the language, the music, anything.

It is alienating to go weeks without ever feeling really safe, really normal, really like yourself. I cried more heartfelt, truly painful prayers in the first weeks that I was in Slovakia than I thought I could physically produce. I thought I could do anything and that I had a good background to minister and that I was ready to do what I was doing. I had no idea. Yet internationals around me understand completely what I experienced.

They know how frightening it can be to step on a bus with no idea where the bus will go and no ability to ask for directions. They know how frustrating it is when a friendly wave sends someone walking the other way. The internationals living around us have stood in a supermarket and felt tears because nothing looks familiar. Or in a hospital while people talked over their dying child and they understood nothing. These international persons understand what it means to have to ask for help with everything from government papers to transportation to shopping and housing. They understand what it is like to feel like a child desperate for a Father to show mercy. To make them feel at home. To laugh with them. To remind them it will be okay.

Living here in our mission field are internationals, refugees, and students. Some of these people are Christian, here seeking sanctuary in their faith. Others know little if anything of Christianity. They are here for safety, security, and education denied to them in their countries of origin. Yet, their experiences are remarkably similar. They may have been here a week or a year, yet don’t feel they belong. Many are lonely or extremely limited in their support system. Often they are without family, friends, or spiritual support. Resources may be limited. Surroundings are unfamiliar. Nothing is normal. Food. Clothing. Smells. Music. They are strangers in a strange land.

They seek the comfort of home, friendship, and acceptance. They long for people to listen to their stories or share a joke, to break bread or rice balls or soup dumplings with them. And they need people to help them with the most basic skills to make life bearable. Through tears, they see the cold stares, hear the foreign tongue, and feel isolated from all that they used to know. God sees their sadness, hears their cries, and weeps for them. But to most of us, the international persons remain invisible. They don’t have to be. We have a calling. To see the people among us. To call them by name. To invite them into our homes. To know them. To do for them... the least of these. The most challenging mission of all.

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