

Why Are We So Bad at Outreach?

A couple of weeks ago, Jim Tamer passed out a questionnaire called a “Pulse survey.” It’s part of an ongoing effort to involve you in making choices and decisions for our work together. So far, we haven’t been deluged with responses. But Jim sent me a summary of the responses he had about a week ago. At that time, he had received 23 surveys. Now, that’s a pretty small number and I don’t want to make too much out of it, but the responses to two questions do apply to our topic for today. Question 7 dealt with how you feel about your ability to share the gospel. Seven people said that they were comfortable doing outreach. That’s almost a third. But fourteen either said that they don’t know where to start or that they’re afraid of being rejected or embarrassed when they try. That’s close to two-thirds of the responses we had at that moment.

Question 8 focused more on our congregation as a whole. It asked, “How well do you think our congregation does at outreach?” Five people had a positive view. Sixteen out of twenty-three said that we could use some work. Another person said we don’t do it at all. Now, more surveys have come in since then and I hope we’ll continue to get them from you. But the initial responses indicate that we’re not happy with how this is going here at Peace. It’s not a disaster, but it could use some improvement.

When Jesus ascended into heaven, the whole Christian Church consisted of one congregation in Jerusalem with about 120 members, and probably some other believers scattered throughout Israel. They were a tiny percentage of the world’s population, but Jesus told them to preach the gospel to all creation. He intended the church to reach out. In Acts chapter two, three thousand people joined that Jerusalem congregation in one day. As the book goes on, the church grows and grows. But that isn’t our experience. Over the last twenty-five years, our total membership in the WELS has dropped by more than 13%. Here at Peace, it’s dropped by almost a third. Now, we have had adult confirmations pretty regularly over the years. Most of the time, I have at least a couple of people in class. But it often seems like it’s one step forward and two steps back. Why is that the case? I know it’s a little provocative to say it this way, but **why are we so bad at outreach?**

You know what? Within the WELS, we probably aren’t that bad. In fact, our experience is fairly typical. Our synod is divided into twelve districts. At one end of the scale, there is a district where there is one adult confirmation per year for every twenty communicant members. At the other end of the scale, there is a district in which there is one adult confirmation each year for every 138 members. Where are we? Somewhere in the middle. In the Michigan District, there is one confirmation for every 88 communicant members. Here at Peace, that would equate to three or four adult confirmations per year. Most years, we do have at least that many.

But that still doesn’t translate to rapid growth. It doesn’t really even balance those members that die every year, to say nothing of those who transfer out or just “slip away.” So why are we shrinking? The single biggest reason is demographic. The WELS used to grow biologically. People got married in their early twenties and had four or more kids and raised them in the church. For generations, we more than replaced ourselves with people like ourselves and often, when new people came in, it was because they were marrying someone who was already here. So our synod grew until the late 1980’s. Peace grew. But then people started marrying later and having fewer children. Today, most people get married in their very late twenties and have two children or less. One third of all millennials say that they never want to have children. So now, we’re dying faster than we’re multiplying.

We can’t just grow by biology anymore. Maybe that’s a good thing, because Jesus commanded us to preach the gospel to all nations. Maybe we Lutherans got a little complacent when we could see our numbers go up every year while we were doing relatively little to make it happen. There are other demographic things we could talk about, like jobs and people moving away. Those things are real and they do make our work harder. But Jesus promised that when we preach the good news, the Holy Spirit will work. Now, the Holy Spirit gives faith where and when he wills. We have no promise that that he will open a door here in Livonia and Westland and Garden City. But do we have any reason to believe that God has not opened a door here? Have we even done enough outreach to be able to say if there is a door open here or not?

Or is our real problem the fact that we’re afraid to try? Those preliminary results certainly seem to indicate that. I understand that feeling. This summer, I had a call to a church in Texas. One of the reasons I stayed here was the fact that the church there needed a pastor who would dedicate almost his full time to

reaching out to the lost. I wasn't convinced that I'm the best person to lead an effort like that. Quite frankly, it scared me. If I were to ask you to go knock on doors and invite people to church, how would you feel? If a friend is going to have surgery and they're scared, how would you talk to them about Jesus and his love? One reason we're afraid is that we don't always know what we're supposed to say. Of course, we fear conflict, right? How will we feel if we're rejected? How will we feel if we lose friends over this? Those are real feelings that we all experience. They're only magnified by the realities of life in the world today. We don't really want to have an argument about gay marriage or unisex bathrooms or anything of the other antichristian ideals our society is embracing.

But God still calls us to reach out. Now, outreach is not always job one. In a mission congregation, outreach is pretty much the whole ball game. That district with the really positive ratio of adult confirmations has lots of mission congregations. But in larger congregations outreach isn't always the all-consuming thing it is in a mission. When I first came to Peace, this congregation had just gone through a painful resignation. We were in crisis on every front. Job one was to stabilize the situation so that we had a church to reach out from. This past year, we went through another challenging year. We've seen our school enrollment drop from 81 to 69. This is a rebuilding year and getting everything back on a solid foundation has to be a priority. Outreach can't be our only thing.

But it does have to be one of our main things. For too long in the WELS, we've allowed outreach to slip onto the back burner while we took care of other things. For too long in the WELS, we've allowed ourselves to believe that sharing the gospel was something we paid people to do. It's the job of our pastors. We all want people to hear and believe. But we haven't all internalized the truth that Jesus calls all of us to be prepared to give an answer for the hope that we have. God tells us to do a lot of other things, too. Preaching, teaching, providing cradle to grave spiritual care for our members – that's also at the heart of our mission. We don't want a congregation where the sick and the elderly don't get visited, right? We've chosen to establish a Lutheran elementary school and a preschool and to support a Lutheran high school so that our kids grow up knowing the gospel. That is all God pleasing.

But we have to learn to balance the work God gives us to do. It's about priorities. Most of us get our highest priorities done. We get to work. We get our kids to school. Some of us even get our houses cleaned or our yards mowed on a regular basis. Some of us spend hours every week watching TV or surfing the internet. We do the things that we make come first. Because sharing our faith is hard and scary, it's easy for it to drop way down our personal priority list. It's easy to let it drop way down our congregation's priority list or to hope someone else will take care of it.

So why are we so bad at outreach? There isn't one reason except that we live in a sinful world. It's a combination of our history and our attitudes, and also our fear and our laziness. In a perfect world, none of those things would get in the way of telling the good news about Jesus. But in a perfect world, everyone would already know about Jesus. We live in a sinful world. The devil uses all those demographic and personal and congregational things to wage war against our faith. He doesn't want the gospel to go out. He doesn't want us to serve God. And our sinful flesh agrees with him. Laziness is sin, especially when it comes to preparing ourselves to share the gospel. Fear may seem less sinful, and I suppose in a way it is. It's an emotional reaction that we can't control. But we're only afraid because we're sinful. If we trusted Jesus perfectly, we'd never fear sharing his word. We're bad at this because we're sinners living in a sinful world.

But God knows that. He knows how weak and sinful we are, so he knows how bad we're going to be at this. And still, he calls us to do it. He doesn't do so that he can hold our failure over our heads. He does it so that we can have the joy that comes from sharing Jesus. He wants us to experience the miracle of seeing people come to faith. He wants us to have the comfort that only comes from the gospel. And you will never learn the gospel better than when you explain it to someone else.

Jesus died and he paid for all our sin and weakness. He paid for our laziness and our fear and our bad priorities. He rose and he wiped all that sin away. When you go to heaven, Jesus is not going to ask you about all the times you blew it! He's going to say, "Well done, good and faithful servant!" Can you imagine that? Do you feel like you deserve that commendation from Jesus? I don't. But that's what the gospel does. It makes us perfect in God's sight. God sees you that way now, even while he sees your sin here.

And he promises that when you hear that you are forgiven, the Holy Spirit will work in your heart and prepare you to serve. So, it is important to be trained to share your faith. But it's just as important simply to

grow in your faith. The more you know Jesus, the more you mature in faith so that you can take on these responsibilities with joy. Then when we speak, the Holy Spirit works through the gospel and he creates faith in those who hear us. It's not up to us to argue people in. And before the world began, God chose everyone who will come to faith. No one is going to miss out because we screwed up.

Jesus still does more. He defeated the devil when he died and rose. He sends his angels to us while we're doing his work. They protect us from the devil. They protect us from the enemies of the gospel. So no harm can come to you when people hate you and reject your message – not even if they attack you physically or fire you from your job or end a lifelong friendship with you. Jesus watches over us. His goal is to bring us home to heaven where all hurts are healed. Nothing comes but what Jesus says is for our good, so even hurt and sorrow serve our faith. So when sharing the gospel hurts, when it twists our stomachs into knots, when people we care about mock us and end relationships with us, if we're arrested and tortured and killed, Jesus is still working. The Savior who sweat great drops of blood in the Garden of Gethsemane, who allowed Roman soldiers to nail him to a cross, who endured hell while his Father abandoned him on the cross, who gave up his spirit and died so that we will live, that Savior will not allow anything to come to our lives except what he uses to bring us home.

So the real question isn't: why are we so bad at this? The real question is: what does God do to make us better? With that question comes another: are we committed to serving the God who loves us? By the grace of God, every one of us knows our Savior. Every one of us has the gospel and the opportunity to learn and grow in this area. Every one of us has Jesus walking with us and the Holy Spirit working in our hearts and God the Father overseeing everything. Trust in what God has done for you and what he is still doing for you. Commit yourself to learning to share the gospel and then to doing it. Amen.