

## Foreword

**W**hat are your expectations of the Holy Spirit? Before you begin to read *The Mission Table*, take time to ponder that question and write down your responses.

When you read the scriptures, what are your expectations of the Holy Spirit? What do you expect the Holy Spirit will accomplish when you gather for worship? If I asked you to describe what the Holy Spirit is up to in and through your congregation, to what would you give witness? What are the hopes and the hurts, the fears and the faith of those who live in the community around your congregation? How would they describe the good life? Who are the neglected, the isolated who assume no one knows their names and who have no table to which they are welcomed?

In *The Mission Table*, my colleague Pastor Stephen Bouman invites us—challenges us—to be a church with high expectations of the Holy Spirit. He assumes the Holy Spirit is not done with us yet. Through the good news of Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit is at work making us new creations in Christ, reconciling the alienated, forgiving us and setting us free for lives of witness and service. The Holy Spirit is at work tearing down the walls that divide us and turning those walls into tables of reconciliation and conversation. Christ welcomes all to the table of his presence.

No congregation is absent the power and presence of the Holy Spirit. Not one of us lacks gifts of the Spirit. Christ risen from the dead means there are no godforsaken places or God-forgotten people. Yet we sometimes forget Jesus promised that we will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on us. That is especially true when we describe the church

on the basis of what we lack and have lost and nostalgically long for days gone by.

We have all that we need: God's promise. So we begin by listening. We listen to God's promises spoken to God's people throughout the scriptures. We listen to one another as we discern the gifts the Spirit has given for the sake of the gospel and the common good. We listen to the life stories of those who live in the communities around us. In those three great listenings, we believe the Holy Spirit is at work renewing us, restoring us, and sending us to be about God's work for the life of the world. We go because we believe our neighbors deserve to hear the good news of God's love for them. We go anointed with the power of the Spirit.

And we do not go alone. I encourage you to study *The Mission Table* with members of other congregations in your community. Invite those who have no community of faith to listen with you. Enter your study of this book with high expectations of the Holy Spirit.

But beware! Because when the Holy Spirit shows up, lives are changed—the dead are raised, demons are cast out, sins are forgiven, despair gives way to hope, unbelief turns to faith, the alienated are reconciled, those in poverty hear good news, people sell their possessions and give to the poor, and all are welcome at the table. Pentecost was not a onetime event. Jesus promised to send the Holy Spirit, the Advocate, who reminds us when we forget God's faithfulness to God's promise and empowers us to do even greater deeds than Jesus did (John 14).

What a cause for high expectations of the Holy Spirit!

Day of Pentecost 2013  
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## INTRODUCTION

# Mission and the Mainline



*From one ancestor [God] made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him.*

—Acts 17:26-27

Over the past few years, we have become accustomed to headlines in the press declaring the demise of mainline Protestant Christianity—for example, a January 2013 cover story in *The Lutheran* titled “The Shrinking Church” and a 2012 editorial in the *New York Times* titled “The Decline of the Mainline.” Some prognosticators are moving beyond “shrinking” and “declining” to pronounce “death” for Lutheran, Episcopal, Presbyterian, United Church of Christ, Methodist, and other mainline Protestant denominations. Although I believe the death knell is premature, there is no question that our churches are declining, that the public cultural context in which the church lives is in the midst of massive change, that an emerging generation is largely absent from church, and that these things have been going on for a long time. Among the more than ten thousand congregations

of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), some are shrinking in size, some are dying, some are thriving, and many are labeled “at risk” by various measurements, but they are not going away anytime soon.

## **Engaging the Conversation**

This book on the mission of the church is written with full acknowledgment of the deteriorating and shrinking forms of life and mission for mainline congregations and institutions, but also with the conviction that these communities of Jesus are still, or can be again, vital to God’s mission in the world. I believe our decline is tinged with hope, and we in the ELCA want to join and move forward a conversation about mission that is energizing the Lutheran church and our mainline partners.

Mainline churches are working hard to address the present disconnect between the church and the world and to live into a new future. Many so-called emerging faith communities and mission probes are changing the church’s “front door”—referring to where and how new people enter a congregation—from worship style to service to struggle for the souls of our communities. Many of these “emerging” mission communities are with young adults.

As we think about today’s context for mission, consider the situation of the apostle Paul on Mars Hill (Acts 17). Paul noticed the many diverse ways that faith and spiritual seeking flowered in Athens. He took these spiritual journeys seriously and sought to understand and respect them. He practiced the great foundational mission act of *listening* by hearing the stories of his neighbors and noticing their spiritual journeys. From the heart of what he heard, he shared his own story: the death and resurrection of Jesus for the life of the world. He joined their spiritual conversation, saying, “What . . . you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you” (v. 23).

## **Engaging Leaders**

The conversation about mission must include laypeople, pastors, seminarians, and emerging congregational leaders. Leaders for mission today

must work differently than we have in the past. Over thirty years ago, I graduated from seminary with a set of skills that helped me teach and interpret scripture, and enabled me to manage the congregational structures in place when I arrived at my first pastorate. I was also trained in providing pastoral care for and with the faithful. Evangelism was the stilted activity of one of many ongoing committees.

Today leadership that manages existing congregational structures, takes care of the members, and does strategic planning as if knowing what the future holds will no longer suffice for the mission of the church and our congregations. We cannot assume that our culture, or even members of our congregations, can tell the old, old story of the biblical drama or that they know the forms, songs, and prayers of the liturgy.

Leaders today must be prepared to come alongside a congregation and its individual members and be willing to reroot the life of that congregation in the life of its community. Leaders today must join members and neighbors in their spiritual journeys, hearing their disappointments, questions, and hopes. They must agitate for mission imagination and courage and be willing to see old things die and risk new things being born. Their focus must be on helping people embrace their baptismal vocation.

## Talking about Mission

*Mission* is one of those words used often for many different reasons. Mission statements drive the work of businesses, nonprofits, the local bowling league, and even our churches. When I speak about the *mission of the church* in these pages, I mean *God's reconciling and restoring action in the world*. Scholars of mission have called this the *missio Dei* (mission of God). Broadly this movement of God in the world draws all creation to the fullness that God intends. We sometimes call this the reign of God or kingdom of God. In faith we believe this is happening all around us all the time, and part of our faith journey is to look for ways in which we can participate. God is present in the world.

Martin Luther's comment on the second petition of the Lord's Prayer—"Your kingdom come"—echoes this belief: "God's kingdom

comes on its own without our prayer, but we ask in this prayer that it may also come to us.”<sup>1</sup>

For Christians, our baptism in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus pulls us all toward this mission in the name of Jesus. Lutherans and other Protestants call this Christian vocation “the priesthood of all believers.” In our baptism into the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, we become a part of the body of Christ in the world. Jesus’ mission of healing, reconciling, and restoring identity becomes our own.

Lutherans have a distinct contribution to make to a conversation about mission. Our central tenets of sacramental vitality, grace, the vocation of the priesthood of all believers, and a “two-handed” God at work in the world while leading this present time toward eternity undergird the discussion. This image of God reflects Martin Luther’s “two kingdoms” theology, which speaks of a God active both in the everyday events of human history and in the ultimate salvation of all creation.

*Table* is a central image for this book. Table is about relationships and community. The tables of our lives center our trust in a God who is perfect relationship. The God we call the Holy Trinity and in whom we have been baptized is perfect love and community. The fullness of this God is pleased to dwell in this world in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

What shapes the tables of our communities of Jesus, each baptized disciple, and his or her mission in the world is the biblical drama of the story of Israel; the paschal mystery of the life, mission, death, and resurrection of Jesus; and the New Testament church that emerged from these narratives.

Our tables are expressions, in the name of Jesus, of God’s love and community:

- The perfect table of creation, where all creation was in harmony with the Creator.
- The broken table and the sorrow and death of this world, which has lost its perfect community and mutual relationship with the Creator.
- The kitchen table where we heard stories of our biblical and familial ancestors, where our faith, culture, and values were formed.
- The altar table of our congregations, which unites the kitchen tables of our parishes.

- New tables that we form with our neighbors: tables of renewal, reconciled relationships, and restored vision for the life of the world God loves.

*Mission tables* take shape when kitchen and altar tables merge with new and renewed tables in the community locally and globally—where new relationships of mutuality and reconciliation are formed for the life of the world. I refer to this process as “rerooting in the community.” Here we practice the *three great listenings*: listening to God, listening to one another in the church, and listening to our neighbors in the community. The ELCA’s global mission is driven by such listening in a movement called *accompaniment*, a term I will also use in this discussion.

I will use the word *Eucharist* to describe the sacrament of Holy Communion, the Lord’s Supper. *Eucharist* is a rich table word that means “thanksgiving” in Greek. It reminds us that Jesus at the table with his disciples said a table prayer like many of us have experienced. He took bread, then wine, and each time gave thanks for it, reminding us of our good Creator.

## Using This Book

This book is meant to be used in congregations by lay leaders, pastors, and rostered leaders, and also by seminarians, participants in lay schools and lifelong learning programs, mission developers, synod leaders and staff, and other denominational leaders.

Each of the chapters is infused with scripture and the questions and activities lend themselves to group study, reflection, and action. In addition, the Model for Congregation Listening Tables (pages 99-101) can help congregations and other groups in their initial vision and plans for setting listening tables.

Group discussion of the seven chapters and introduction can be configured in a number of ways. One approach that congregations might consider is a three-module format offered over the course of a year:

Module A: Tables (introduction, chapters 1–3)

Session 1: Mission and the Mainline (introduction)

Session 2: The Table of Creation (chapter 1)

Session 3: From the Kitchen Table to the Altar Table (chapter 2)

Session 4: Seeking Hospitality at New Tables (chapter 3)

Module B: Exploring the Biblical Marks of a Missional Congregation  
(chapter 4)

Session 5: Marks 1–3

Session 6: Marks 4–7

Session 7: Marks 8–10

Module C: Rerooting in the Community (chapters 5–7)

Session 8: Mission Table Leadership (chapter 5)

Session 9: Setting Mission Tables (chapter 6)

Session 10: Restoring the Broken Table (chapter 7)

A congregation could work through these modules on two tracks: the first could be for the congregation council alone, and then the council could invite leaders of other teams in the congregation to participate. For example, a congregation council could begin with Module A following the annual congregational meeting, and after three to four months move to Module B. As this central leadership team engages in conversation about biblical marks of a missional congregation (Module B), other leaders could begin with Module A. Then, after three to four months, the central leadership team could move on to Module C and the leaders of other congregational teams could begin Module B, with all leaders having completed the process in approximately sixteen months. In addition, all congregational members could be engaged in the process through sermons and Bible studies based on the central Bible passages woven through the book. This is just one model. Many other approaches are possible, and you will know best what will work in your setting.

### **So That All Would Search for God (Acts 17:27)**

Congregations on the Mars Hill of today's diverse, global society have a role to play, much like that of the apostle Paul's: to listen, to engage, to fashion new tables while communally groping for God in the world, to live as signs of the God who made the world and who will make all things new.