

The Little Word that Make Christ's Commission Great: All!

By, Roger Knepprath

[Minnesota District Convention June, 2004]

- I. Who are the "all"?
 - A. Study the Scriptures
 - B. Study your community
 - C. Study your congregation
- II. How do we reach the "all"?
 - A. With our love
 - B. With THE message
 - C. With Christ's mission
- III. How many of the "all" should we be expecting?
 - A. Jesus has all authority
 - B. Jesus is with us all the time

You tell your nine year old son to eat all his soup. He leaves the table and you notice he failed to eat seven noodles. Do you get angry and call him back to the table to finish? Maybe you're just disappointed and you let him know, "You could have done better."

You tell your fourteen year old daughter, "Pick up all the clothes in your room." You may even punctuate with, "What a sty!" When you return an hour later there are still two or three items of clothing under her bed. How do you react? Can you hear yourself saying, "Didn't you hear me say all the clothes? Do you know what all means?"

"Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Matthew 28:19). We regularly refer to that as the Great Commission. I wonder who coined that phrase. Perhaps one of you knows. I searched without success for that bit of trivia. I'd be interested in knowing what he (or she) meant by "great." Could "great" allude to the person who gave this task? He certainly was and continues to be great—Jesus Christ, the One and Only, King of kings, the Alpha and Omega. Could "great" allude to the length of the task? Wow! This is something Jesus wants us to do until he returns. That's a job that's lasting two thousand years and counting. Here's a job that needed to be passed on from one generation to the next, otherwise neither you nor I would be sitting here right now. For all the differences between the Builders (late 50s+), the Boomers (late 30s to late 50s), the Busters (late 20s to late 30s) and the Bridgers (the rest), this is one thing we had better have in common.

Personally, I'd like to think that the "great" is reference to the incredible mass of people Jesus intends his church to reach. The Great Commission is one tall order! Jesus commands you and me to make disciples of *panta ta ethnay*. Please, excuse my gree(ke)nglish. How do you say . . . Oh, yes! All nations. Jesus wants us to make disciples of all.

There's that word again: all. Do we know what Jesus meant by "all?" Jesus makes this a no-brainer for us by saying, "*Panta ta ethnay* will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats" (Matthew 25:32). I suppose we could site a few passages to demonstrate who will be judged when Jesus returns but I believe we all know that. All will be judged on the last day. Not only does that verse shed light on the meaning of all, but it also illuminates why Jesus wants us to reach out to all. Some day, perhaps one day soon, Jesus will have to judge every last one of them. How much do you suppose Jesus will hurt every time he has to send someone to the left? How much will you or I hurt?

Yes, Jesus is an emotional guy. We see him grieve over Jerusalem. We see him in fierce anger cleanse the temple. That brings me back to that nine year old son and that fourteen year old daughter. Do we know what all means? We might get upset (for me it's pretty much a given) when our children don't eat all their food or pick up all their clothes. What if rather than leaving a few noodles our boy only eats six or seven noodles and

leaves the rest to waste? What if rather than leaving a few items of clothing our girl doesn't pick up even one? Would they have earned our wrath?

We are the children of God, graciously adopted because his one and only natural Son willingly covered us in his precious and perfect shed blood. Our heavenly Father has asked us to make disciples of all nations. Which set of children previously mentioned do we most resemble? Pastors, teachers, lay representatives, are we earning God's wrath? Oh, yes, Jesus died for our sin of not picking up our world. Really, he has. What comfort that objective truth is. Are we seeking his forgiveness? Do we recognize our sin? I know I need to repent. Oh, how I desire to bear fruit in keeping with repentance.

I hope you can help me. I wonder if I can be of any help to you. Are we willing to be of help to each other? Can we put behind us days of feeling accomplished because we have one, two, five, fifteen adult confirmands? Can we admit that we've been salving our consciences with the numbers of professions of faith and transfers that occasionally bolster our numbers? Can we, today, together, while building each other up, take a peek under our beds of excuses to see just how many of the "all" we've successively put out of our minds? I publicly confess my sin before God and before you. I am sorry for so long not paying much attention to that little word with a huge meaning. I thank God for leading me to recognize **THE LITTLE WORD THAT MAKES CHRIST'S COMMISSION GREAT: ALL.**

Father in heaven, let your kingdom come among us today and through us in the future. Thank you for sending your Son to fulfill all righteousness for us. You deserve to have us take you at your word and use all our time, talents, treasures, creativity, guts, even all the plunder of the Egyptians to make disciples of all nations. Amen.

I do not approach you as an expert. Rather I stand before you as a parish pastor, and so an expert at nothing. My time and energy are often monopolized by the cries of church members rather than the cries of potential Christians. For six and a half years I had the wonderful privilege of being an outreach pastor and that in a city of a million. As I look back on those years it fascinates me to remember how the cries of the membership became all the louder the more I invested myself in those outside the church. I've discovered by personal experience that those we fail to get involved in the work of outreach within a congregation will feel ripped off by a pastor who is involved in outreach work. I've also discovered by personal experience that those in the congregation we do get involved in outreach work will be the most fulfilled and most grateful people you will ever meet. They will express their gratitude even years after you are no longer their pastor.

The other thing I remember is that potential Christians, those truly outside the Church, don't cry out for help. They, in general, don't even know they need help. They pride themselves on being self-sufficient. My point is that they are not going to vie for our attention. Someone has to get our attention on their behalf. Certainly Jesus does that in the Word with his Great Commission and elsewhere. Actually there are a lot of "elsewheres" in the Bible. But I, for one, forget about the unchurched if somebody isn't rattling my cage on their behalf. Who is the cage rattler in your congregation? Is he/she self appointed or official? How many cages is this person expected to rattle and how often? Are there any cages off limits?

Since I was the outreach pastor in my former congregation I was the cage rattler there. No such person has appeared in my present congregation. Lyle E. Schaller suggests this is an appropriate purpose of a congregation's evangelism committee. Over five pages he lists seventeen different groups within a congregation for the committee to approach with a variety of questions. "They might ask that handful of members who persistently badmouth the church, the minister, and the program, 'Would you please shut up?'"¹ "If over the next two or three years the evangelism committee asks enough leading questions of various individuals, organizations, and groups, the members of the evangelism committee may become slightly obnoxious. They also may change the climate of that congregation and cause nearly everyone to become conscious of the need to make church growth a priority for every committee and every organization."²

¹ Lyle E. Schaller, *Growing Plans: Strategies to Increase Your Church's Membership* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1985), p. 108.

² Ibid.

Today I get to be the cage rattler for pastors, teachers, and lay representatives of the Minnesota District. I want the “all” of Christ’s Great Commission to have and hold your attention. I intend to focus on the “all” from three different angles. Who are the “all”? How do we reach the “all”? How many of the “all” should we be expecting?

Who are the “all”? The book of Acts is always a fun read. It’s especially enjoyable when it’s read as the church’s immediate response to Christ’s Great Commission. In chapter two God provides his church of one hundred and twenty a city filled with “Jews from every nation under heaven” (v.5). Peter begins his message with, “Fellow Jews and all of you who live in Jerusalem” (v. 14). This was fifty days after that tumultuous weekend when Jesus was crucified and rose from the dead. Peter knew there were tender consciences and hardened hearts in this crowd. He included them all, specifically addressing those who “with the help of wicked men, put (Jesus), to death by nailing him to the cross” (v.23). He says, “Let all Israel be assured of this” (v.36), and concludes, “The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off-for all whom the Lord our God will call” (v.39).

Does it strike you how often the word “all” occurs in this chapter? It struck me that “all” occurs more often in Acts than any other book in the New Testament. What an excellent book to dig into to kick off or bolster the outreach efforts of your congregation. Yes, there are canned studies on the book of Acts, but I’d like to suggest that we treat our adults like adults. Don’t rob them of the adventure of discovery. Perhaps the most earth shaking discovery I’ve made about myself over the past few years came in connection with a Summer Quarter course on adult spiritual growth. I learned that adults really don’t appreciate being treated as children when it comes to spiritual growth. I learned that adults enjoy learning right along side their pastors rather than under them.

Two principles that I have tried to incorporate in my adult Bible discussions since that seminar is to strive for a lesson plan in which I do the least amount of talking and that is open ended. In other words, I know that the conclusion will be based on God’s Word, but I don’t know the exact answers we will end up with. So a study of the book of Acts might simply inform participants that there are six summary reports of progress that divide up the book (6:7, 9:31, 12:24, 16:5, 19:20, 28:31). Let’s discover over six meetings who the “all” are that the New Testament church made disciples of and, this is most important, let’s determine who those “all” are in our own mission fields. You can add another question to this discussion or sit down for another six weeks and call it level two. Join your heads in discovering how they reached out to their “all” and how that translates into an outreach method today.

My associate and I have discovered an added benefit to this determination to be participants in discussion rather than lecturers in the classroom. We may know Scripture well but we really don’t know how others, especially those of other generations and other cultures, process it. My associate and I are both Baby Boomers. Our present Adult Information Class has in it a couple Busters and three Bridgers. It would not be an understatement to say we have learned more from them than they have learned from us. I believe they are helping us be better communicators, more compassionate communicators, than before. They have also taught us that they will be better sharers of the Gospel with other Busters and Bridgers than we will ever be. Incidentally, one participant is also a Boomer, but she’s from Mexico, so we have a lot to learn from her, too. We also have a Jesus Cares confirmation class with three participants. Wow, have I learned a lot from them about being understood.

By this time you might be wondering, “Well, are you going to tell us who the ‘all’ are as revealed in the book of Acts?” I hope you’re thinking that because that means I have you intrigued. Here’s another principle for adult spiritual growth that I try to employ. I don’t give participants all the answers; rather I direct them to the answer book: the Bible. We don’t want people dependent on us, my brothers in the ministry. Let’s intrigue them about a subject and get them excited about searching for it themselves in the Word. This can be done in sermons as well. Don’t have your people leave church thinking, “Well, that’s all there is to know on that subject.” Now I know you’re eager to get back to your rooms and pour over the book of Acts. It’s pretty amazing and thoroughly instructive all the people the early church reached out to. Have fun.

Don't be overwhelmed by the word "all." Jesus told his few disciples that they would be his "witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8). As you read through Acts, you notice that they didn't do all those at once, but each in turn. "To the ends of the earth" was last and was the result of the church doing the first two. Because our congregations are part of a synod that they can financially support to send out missionaries into the world we have the unusual ability to do the last without addressing the first. That's not healthy.

As a parish consultant I've been in the position to ask many church members from various churches to evaluate their congregations' outreach. It has not been unusual for members to give high marks to their congregations because they have a "healthy" sum of money going to synod annually. When I persist with questions about local outreach they often don't understand my question or are unaware of what their congregations are doing.

Let's praise our God who forced us to call missionaries home from our world missions that are thriving to help our shrinking synod. I've heard many call that a bad thing, and yet here we are focused on North American Outreach. Thank God he still loves us enough to set our priorities straight. I pray those people he called home will be the blessing to us that he intends. I pray that those world missionaries that now find themselves serving established congregations stateside will not allow business as usual. May they inspire their congregations to see the "all" in their communities. May they inspire us to do the same.

Who are the "all" with whom God would have each of our congregations begin? "Every congregation has a neighborhood around it, and every neighborhood has people who are hurting, people who are lonely, people who may be lost. Every church is located in a community, and every community has its jail, its poor people, its suffering people. So every congregation is the steward of an opportunity. All that is expected of stewards is that they be trustworthy in that opportunity."³ I wonder what would happen if we worked harder at helping our congregations be better stewards of their opportunities for outreach rather than working so hard at making them good stewards of their money?

It's becoming more and more of a struggle for me to discount those who suggest our church body works a lot harder at fund raising than people raising. But now I can tell them about our new spiritual renewal program just getting underway. I can tell them about the seminars our District Evangelism Board will be providing them over the next three years. I can tell them about the person who will be visiting our church in connection with North American Outreach. I can tell them I believe our priorities are in the right place and encourage them to take full advantage of the support being offered.

Every time I have gone through a School of Outreach (2) and every time I've been part of Parish Assistance (4) the Holy Spirit has blessed me to see more of the "all" that God has called me or my congregation to witness to. It still embarrasses me to look back at the arrival of the Parish Assistance team to my congregation and we weren't ready for them. It wasn't a matter of time. I just simply didn't think certain things they were asking for were all that important. One was a person to drive them around our community that really knew it well. I don't exactly remember how the team got their point across to me, but after their visit I called the City Development Director and was astonished at what he was willing to do for me. I was overwhelmed by his wealth of information. I was so pleased with his cooperation that I suggested to our congregation that we have a Public Servant Appreciation Sunday. To this day it is the most astonishing thing I've seen a congregation do for its community. We had firemen, the policeman who walked our beat; we had the mayor of our 600,000 person burg and his entourage, join us for worship that day and for a meal afterwards.

Perhaps my most enjoyable days of ministry so far occurred up in Ottawa, ON, when the Lord blessed me with a most willing tour guide into our inner city community. This gentleman lived in subsidized housing and frequented food lines. He loved his Lord and he appreciated his pastor. Often he would invite me out for lunch and, although I always had to pay, it was impossible to put a price tag on those outings. Without fail he would greet people from the community and introduce them to his pastor. Often he would invite them to join us for our lunch and then he would initiate a conversation that would allow me to share the Gospel. There's

³ Clifford Christians, Earl J. Schipper, and Wesley Smedes, *Who in the World?* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1972), p.160.

nothing like getting out onto the streets in a large community to get to know who the “all” are in your community.

I suspect the same is true in a small community. I have yet to find my next tour guide, however. Instead I have found it easier to slip into certain activities in our small community that has helped me meet people. When I heard some interest in putting in a bike trail to our community I got onto the Bike and Hike Commission. That put me in contact with someone going off the Service Enterprise Incorporated Board who recommended me to replace him. SEI finds employment for the developmentally disabled in our community. When we heard that no one was doing regular devotions anymore at the County Jail we offered our services there, as well. In a round about way, that has allowed us to get to know a few of the “all” that live on the reservation just east of our community. We hope that relationships initiated behind bars will continue after their release. Experience proves that getting to know some of the “all” results in being introduced to many more. Who are the “all”? We meet them in the Bible. We see them in our communities. Do we see them in our churches? I used to just be concerned about the number of people that participated in worship in my church. Yes, there is an unhealthy concern for numbers. Now I pay attention to the variety of people that come to worship. Yes, I believe, there is a healthy concern for numbers. To what degree do the demographics of your worshippers match the demographics of your community? I believe this is a key question to measure to what degree a congregation is taking seriously Jesus’ command to make disciples of “all”.

Oh, I can already hear someone saying, “Well, my community is five percent gay. Does that mean I should strive to have five percent of my congregation be gay?” Since there’s no such thing as a stupid question, the answer is, “No.” However, since Jesus brought the sexually immoral into his kingdom (like the woman caught in adultery and all the men who caught her) I would be disappointed if a congregation in that community didn’t have at least a few recovering homosexuals in it. I never knew the percentage of gays living in the last community I served, but I do know that our congregation’s membership was one percent recovering homosexuals when I left. It was also over ninety percent German in a community that had only .4% of its population claim German descent. I had a tough time arguing with an elderly Chinese woman whom I met walking by our church. When I invited her to join us for worship she said, “But this is the German church.” How would you have answered her?

How can we change this image? How can we reach the “all”? Do we reach out to them or do we wait for them to get in contact with us? Our theology ought to make this very clear and make us, more than anyone else, outreach oriented. Those outside of the Holy Christian Church have absolutely no reason to contact us. They are “dead in (their) transgressions and sins” (Ephesians 2:1). They are “hostile to God” (Romans 8:7). They “know nothing, they understand nothing. They walk about in darkness” (Psalm 82:5). It will be no surprise to us that Jesus didn’t say, “Wait and make disciples of all nations.” He tells us, “Go!” My encouragement is that we go with our love, with the message, and with Christ’s mission. When I initially shared this part of my outline with the chairman of our congregation he pointed at “with our love” and said, “I don’t think we’re very good at that.” He was talking about more than just our congregation. I agree that, in general, our congregations do not excel in pre-evangelism.

Perhaps one reason that’s true is because there are those among us who think pre-evangelism is an unscriptural activity. Perhaps the term is attached to an unscriptural belief in some circles, the idea that we can make hearts ready for the Holy Spirit’s work, but I’m convinced that’s not how it’s used among us. Pre-evangelism is simply doing things that build people’s trust in the messengers so they are comfortable hearing the message. Somehow we want to get people’s attention and then direct them to what matters the most. Each of us has our favorite verses in the Bible, those that communicate to us the best and motivate us the most. I love 1 Peter 3:15, “Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have.” Every time I read that verse I wonder, “What’s going to prompt people to ask me about the hope I have?” That verse drives me to make my hope apparent day by day in what I think, say, and do. I want people asking me questions about my hope so I can tell them about Christ.

In Christ I have what those outside of Christ can not possibly have. That makes me entirely different from them. I am certain God loves me for Jesus’ sake. I know when I talk to God that he hears me and answers

me. “There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.” God no longer punishes me. He disciplines me, so I’m glad when rough times come my way. He’s making things work out for my eternal good. I don’t worry about death. I am comforted when those I love die. I have a purpose for my life and I can feel successful no matter what I’m doing or how well it turned out in the end. This is the kind of thinking that makes Christians unusually carefree and generous.

We see this Spirit in the early church. Acts 2 records, “All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people” (w.44-47). Look how God blessed their pre-evangelism. “And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved” (v.47). Yes, I know! Those people were brought to faith by the means of grace just like everyone else. But it was the love, the peace, the kindness of the church that attracted others to the means of grace. Pre-evangelism, as I see it, is prevalent in Scripture.

How can we make it prevalent in our churches? Perhaps the second reason we do not excel in pre-evangelism is because we aren’t leading our people to recognize how vital it is or training them so they can feel adept at it. So there’s that word that’s receiving so much attention these days among us: leadership. I did not come out of the seminary a leader, nor is this unusual. In perhaps the best book I read preparing for this paper, a Concordia publication written by three Missouri Synod consultants called *Courageous Churches: Refusing Decline/Inviting Growth*, I was relieved to read, “Most of the pastors we surveyed said they did not receive adequate preparation in (leadership) from seminary training. Some learned on their own—many talking in terms of 10-year pilgrimages to learn these skills through trial and error, through books, seminars, and graduate programs.”⁴

How good it is to know one is not alone! What a relief to be able to say, “I really don’t know what I’m doing here. I could use some help,” and not be ridiculed, but taken under the wing and gently nourished. Brothers in the ministry, Parish Assistance provides this as do Summer Quarter opportunities at our Seminary. Lay Brothers, your pastors will be blessed by this and so will you. Provide them the time, the financial support, and the encouragement to pursue leadership training. “Whatever else is involved in the transition to a courageous church (one that refuses decline and invites growth), the pastors in this study indisputably indicated that pastoral leadership is crucial. Clergy must be leaders, not only theologians and pastors. They keenly affect the mix or implementation of principles that provide for positive change.”⁵

How do pastors lead their congregations in reaching the “all”? In late August of last year our congregation hosted a School of Outreach. I preached that weekend on Ephesians 4:17-24; a text that didn’t immediately strike me as one to encourage outreach. Rather than find a more obvious outreach text like Matthew 28:18-20 I was determined to find the outreach thoughts in the pericope for the week. The Lord blessed those efforts with this sermon outline: KEEP YOUR HEAVENWARD BEARING (1) BY LIVING CHRISTWARD [Vs. 20-24] and (2) BY GIVING DIRECTIONS [17-19]. The message turned out to be a clear encouragement to be involved in pre-evangelism and evangelism. It dawned on me that I used to do this with virtually every sermon I preached when I was an outreach pastor.

I hope you caught that. I no longer think of myself as an outreach pastor, but I should. I’ve talked to a couple pastors who used to serve in mission congregations who now serve established congregations. When I asked them if they continue to do the types of things in their established congregations that they learned to do in the mission field they have admitted that they don’t. I don’t understand that and I don’t understand me. But I know that the following out of the School of Outreach manual is true. “It is natural for congregations to become maintenance-minded rather than mission-oriented, to become inward-focused rather than outreach-minded. Therefore outreach needs to be intentionalized, outreach needs to become a priority in the planning process and

⁴ Paul T. Heinecke, Kent R. Hunter, and David S. Luecke, *Courageous Churches: Refusing Decline, Inviting Growth* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1991), p. 90.

⁵ Ibid.

creating and sustaining outreach awareness and commitment has to be an ongoing task.”⁶ This takes leadership, my dear pastors, teachers, and lay representatives. We either beat what comes naturally to congregations or we join them in ignoring the “all” who Jesus calls us to reach.

Pastors lead by continually encouraging outreach from the pulpit. I discovered, however, that the pulpit was really only the first step. When people heard a really motivating and practical outreach sermon they didn’t immediately go out and start sharing the Word and dragging people in. The Spirit moved them by those sermons to seek training. Pastors, therefore, lead by offering Bible studies in how to do outreach.

Just like most every sermon text can provide motivation for outreach, virtually every Bible study can train people in outreach or provide them the tools for outreach. Case in point, I just finished taking a group of seniors through “Trinity: One God, Three Persons” by Norman F. Burger, Jr. One of the participants asked, “How do we talk to people who don’t understand this or agree with this?” I commended the person for an excellent question—and encouraged everyone to recognize that’s the very purpose they come to Bible study. They’ve discussed the materials, had their questions answered, will have the materials at home, can review them, all for the purpose of giving an answer to everyone who asks what kind of God we have.

But it is also valuable to offer Bible studies that are written specifically for outreach training. Two that I felt were a tremendous blessing to the people and ministry of my former congregation are “Always Ready to Give an Answer” by Paul Kelm and “10 Gifts of Grace” by, I believe, Dan Leyrer. We used them as two levels of outreach training called “Grow and Go” and “Grow and Go More.” We also offered them two different times in the week at different times of the day. One author suggested offering such a class, one you want everybody involved in, three times during the same day.

I especially commend to you “10 Gifts of Grace” because it helped our members (and me) understand better than ever before what we have going for us as well as what impact the displaying of our blessings in our lives could have on the unchurched around us. The fact is we have greater peace, hope, joy, power over fear, confidence about the future, closer relationships, more adventure and excitement, a more solid purpose for life, an easier time with change, and a better hold on success than any one not connected to Christ. We have got it made in the Kingdom of God and it shouldn’t surprise us when people with whom we come into contact want in on the deal.

We dare not stop with pre-evangelism, however. We don’t want to be misunderstood. “Let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds *and praise your Father in heaven*” (Matthew 5:16). The italics are mine. Our love must be followed by the message, the law and Gospel, so that our deeds are not misunderstood. We don’t want people praising us or thinking that our God is the same kind of taskmaster that their god is. We want them to know that “we love, because he first loved us” (1 John 4:19). We want them to know “this is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins” (1 John 4:10).

Finally, evangelism is sharing the Good News. Few things disturb me more than when I hear pastors or teachers suggesting that to be a good witness we need only live a God-pleasing life. Pre-evangelism is not enough. Pre-evangelism is only a means to an end. “Faith comes through hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ” (Romans 10:17). Now what we say can be as simple as, “If only my master would see the prophet that is in _____” (2 Kings 5:3). If we are going to reach the “all” we must have the Spirit play his essential role, a role he chooses to play through the Gospel.

Now we are sharing the Good News all the time at our churches and schools. We share the Scriptures in our worship services, in our Bible classes, in our LESSs, in our Sunday schools, in our child care centers. I would venture to guess all the pastors and teachers would be ready to share God’s Word one on one, or two, or three, virtually any time of the day, any day of the week. Had Elisha personally told that young girl to send his way anyone she met who needed help? She certainly was confident that he would receive her master, Naaman, and help him. Have we told our brothers and sisters, young and old, the same? Sharing the Gospel can be as easy for our members as sharing their called workers or inviting people to already planned presentations of the Word.

⁶ *School of Outreach* (Milwaukee, WI: The WELS Commission on Evangelism), p. 61.

Perhaps suggesting that people invite their friends, acquaintances, etc. to worship and Bible Class seems too simplistic for a District paper. Let me remind you that literally three quarters of the visitors to any church come by invitation of a friend or acquaintance. I can't imagine this isn't common knowledge. What are we doing with it? "Perhaps the most obvious observation is that most unchurched people are not being pursued by anyone. . . the single most effective strategy of all—following Jesus' lead of asking them to 'come and see'—is generally neglected."⁷ George Barna suggests up to 73% of the unchurched never get invited. I understand that only about one in ten accept an invitation. Rather than that causing us to give up, I hope it can be reason for us to invite all the more. It doesn't appear we're going to run out of people to invite any time soon.

We want our people offering invitations to hear God's Word. We want to consistently encourage them to do that. We want to make it easy for them. One of Jim Huebner's ideas is to print weekly service themes in advance in the newsletter. Then members can say more than just, "Come to worship with me." They can invite friends to hear a specific message that they know they will find practical for their lives. For instance, Pentecost 3 is about turning sorrow into joy, Pentecost 9 is focused on family, and Pentecost 10 is about prayer.⁸ Another idea is to plan a couple four to six week Bible studies specifically for members to invite friends to from outside the church. A Saturday seminar on marriage enrichment or raising children can work that way, too. What about our children's programs? Let's stop thinking of parents and other members as guests at these events and make them the hosts to the whole neighborhood.

Members' offering invitations is great. Members' sharing the Word of God is better still. I like to tell my parishioners that I want them to listen for two to sermons much like a pregnant woman eats for two. I don't want them to be so selfish as to think the Lord is providing them that day's message just for them but also for someone else in their lives, especially someone not yet part of the Kingdom.

I want our Sunday school children to be listening for two. Why not have the children, after they learn the story, tell it to each other? Then have them consider who they might tell it to during the following week. They could report back how it went, or bring along the person to whom they told it.

I know our teens are quite regularly listening for two when they participate in their Bible discussions. They are so often challenged about their church, their sanctified lives, even about the Bible. We want them to be confident about giving an answer. I'll never forget an evening call I received from a teen who asked all kinds of really in depth and important Bible questions. I could hear her typing like mad as I talked. The questions were from her friend to whom she was instant messaging the answers I provided.

We've already talked about adults listening for two in their Bible discussions. Finally, this is the most compelling reason to have Bible studies in which the participants do more talking than the leader. This is an effective way to have people get comfortable talking about their faith. Let's enable our people in whatever creative way we can to move beyond talking about the weather or the Vikings. Certainly Jesus is more exciting and the "all" are more important.

I'll mention Law/Gospel presentations because they can be helpful. My favorite Law/Gospel presentation at this stage in my ministry is the one verse method using Romans 6:23. When I arrived at my new church four and half years ago I not only used that presentation for every one of my every member visits, but I brought along an elected leader for every visit so they could hear it again and again and again. Yes, teach and model Law/Gospel presentations to as many members as are willing to learn. On the other hand, don't make people feel like they can't witness without such a tool, because they most certainly can. Everyone can say something. I am not satisfied "with your prayers and with your offerings."⁹ I believe Jesus says to each and every one who belongs to him, "You can tell the love of Jesus; You can say he died for all."¹⁰

By the way, I'm just going to present this for a future paper because it's something with which I would very much like help. How important do you suppose the binding-key is in reaching the "all"? It piqued my interest as I perused Acts to notice a huge influx of people into the church after the incident with Ananias and

⁷ George Barna, *Grow Your Church from the Outside In* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books From Gospel Light, 2002), p. 122.

⁸ Barna, p. 92.

⁹ *Christian Worship: A Lutheran Hymnal* (Milwaukee, WI: Northwestern Publishing House, 1993), Hymn 573.

¹⁰ Ibid.

Sapphira (Acts 5). Again I noticed a similar occurrence when Paul read the riot act to Bar-Jesus, called him a child of the devil and struck him blind. We read, “When the proconsul saw what had happened, he believed, for he was amazed at the teaching about the Lord” (Acts 13:12). Then I started thinking about Jesus’ instructions to the seventy he sent out. “But when you enter a town and are not welcomed, go into its streets and say, ‘Even the dust of your town that sticks to our feet we wipe off against you. Yet be sure of this: The kingdom of God is near.’ I tell you, it will be more bearable on that day for Sodom than for that town” (Luke 10:10-12). It’s reasonable to think that we might be burning bridges when we tell people who don’t listen to the Gospel that they only have hell to look forward to. I wonder if the Scripture doesn’t demonstrate that we build more bridges than we burn when we consistently use the binding key. That might also mean we help our outreach efforts when we carry out consistent church discipline and hurt it when we don’t.

The third way we reach out to the “all” is with Christ’s mission. We’ve attracted their attention. We’ve shared the Word with them. The Holy Spirit brings them to faith in Jesus as their Savior. They become members of the congregation. Now what? Please, please, please, please, let there be another step! The next step is assimilation. We need to get our new members firmly attached to the body, solidly into the flock, cherished, supported, and depended on as soon as possible, or, before you know it, they will be gone, back among the “all” again.

There are so, so many reasons to immediately involve your newest members in the ministry of the church. They are a most precious gift from God to your congregation. For one thing, they are the most unbiased people you have among you. Don’t be afraid to ask them how you are doing and don’t hesitate to take them at their word. They know what about you caught their attention, your strengths. You can build on those. They can tell you about their most difficult hurdles, your weaknesses. You can improve on those.

For another thing, new members are the least likely to be suffering from *koinonitis*. Sorry, there’s that greenglish again. *Koinon* is the fellowship of the church which is a wonderful thing. *Koinonitis* is the unfortunate condition of having all your relationships with people who are in the church. If you only spend time with the church, how can you have any bearing whatsoever on the unchurched? New members, however, were just recently unchurched and will likely have all kinds of unchurched family, friends, and acquaintances. They can be your congregation’s bridge to many more of the “all.”

For yet another thing, your new members will know most acutely the difference between being part of the kingdom of God and not being part of that kingdom. Their newfound joy, peace, and confidence will be hard to dispel by those to whom they witness. They can be, with our permission and encouragement, our beggars in the temple courts “walking and jumping, and praising God” (Acts 3:8). The result of that first beggar’s expression of faith is so apropos to our present topic. “All the people were astonished and came running to (Peter and John)” (Acts 3:11).

Can we expect *all* the people to come running to us? Just how many of the “all” should we be expecting? Expectations matter. I believe prophecies can be self-fulfilled in that low expectations can have a huge bearing on how we pursue a certain outcome. For instance, “Oh, I don’t think I’m going to catch any fish today, so what’s the use of going.” By not going fishing you prove yourself a prophet.

I wonder how often Jesus’ disciples went fishing on the Sea of Galilee and caught absolutely nothing. We know of two times and in both those cases we can be certain they were glad they went fishing anyway. Each time Jesus provided them more fish than they knew what to do with. After the first great catch he told these fishermen that life in his kingdom isn’t about catching fish. He called them to catch people. In that call was an obvious promise. Those men looked back at their boats filled to overflowing with flopping fish and thought, “Yes, let’s go catch all kinds of people!”

The Great Commission is a command. The law doesn’t motivate. The law directs. Our New Man needs and wants that direction as long as he’s steeped in the Gospel. So Jesus does the same thing for us that he did for his first disciples. He leaves us with obvious promises; not one, but two. What I find especially intriguing is that both promises include the word “all!” Jesus knew we would find his command to make disciples of *panta ta ethnay* more than slightly overwhelming. So he sandwiched his Great Commission between two great

promises. He assures us that *pasa* authority has been given to him both in heaven and on earth. He also promises that he will be with us *pasas* days right up to the time the ages are completed.

Mixing metaphors may not be the best practice, but I beg you to bear with me. Jesus told his disciples, “I tell you, open your eyes and look at the fields! They are ripe for the harvest” (John 4:35). Isn’t that like saying, “Hey, the sea is full of fish AND THEY’RE HITTING?” Fishing is a blast and especially so when they’re hitting. Jesus uses his authority to provide his church with a massive mission field filled with people, and THEY ARE SPIRITUALLY HUNGRY! I make a habit of keeping an eye on the top ten book lists for fiction and nonfiction. Both have indicated a spiritual hunger among the general public: *The DaVinci Code*, *Five People You Meet in Heaven*, *The Lovely Bones*, *The Purpose Driven Life*, etc. Did you notice a recent *Newsweek* cover displaying Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins, authors of the “biblical” ‘Left Behind’ novels? The article reveals “one in eight Americans (are) reading all these strange books about the end of the world . . . As the world gets increasingly scary . . . even secular Americans sometimes wonder (or at least wonder if they ought to start wondering) whether there might not be something to this End Times stuff. After September 11, 2001, there was such a run on the latest ‘Left Behind’ volume, ‘Desecration,’ that it became the best-selling novel of the year.”¹¹ Why are our congregations bringing in so few of these spiritually hungry people?

I think we simply don’t have near enough lines in the water. Jesus chides, “The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field” (Matthew 9:37,38). We hear that verse and we think we need more . . . pastors? WRONG! STOP THINKING LIKE THAT! Jesus wants more workers so more people can have the fun of pulling in the catch. Pastors shouldn’t be having all the fun. Pastors, reveal your secret fishing holes and share your most effective bait. There are more than enough fish to go around.

I look at the parable of the talents and I think about all the people God gives to each of our congregations. Jesus, our master, left on a journey. Before he left he provided us talents to continue his work. Some congregations he gives one thousand members, some four hundred, and some ten. How will Jesus judge our use of these spiritually gifted people when he returns? “Each one reach one” was, I believe, a theme for one of our evangelism programs. Why don’t we make that a theme for as many years as it takes to make it happen? What fun, what joy, what fulfillment we are allowing people to miss!

There was a time in my ministry when I denigrated the Apostles before my people. “Look at these guys whom Jesus told to go. All they did was hang around Jerusalem. Even when the rest scattered they couldn’t get off ground zero.” How I apologize now in dust and ashes and ask forgiveness for my ignorance. The Apostles had the big picture in mind. They understood that for the church to go some have to be willing to stay behind. Perhaps Peter’s greatest adventures were his few forays into the field to verify that his students were doing the right thing in the right way. But Peter’s work was back at the ranch training goers and sending them out.

I am a frustrated pastor. I can never spend enough time on any aspect of ministry. I feel like I’m barely keeping up. Wouldn’t it be nice to be able to spend a lot of time with a few people, enough time that they could feel comfortable and competent to serve other people? Pastors, could any of us feel accomplished enough with such a ministry? Lay reps, would your congregations be willing to pay a pastor to work so efficiently? Understand such a pastor may never do anything for you personally beyond preach to you and offer you the Lord’s Supper. He would be training others to be a blessing to you in all kinds of other ways. Can we get past the idea that a valuable pastor is one who is involved in a lot and recognize that the most valuable pastor is the one who involves a lot? A pastor and a congregation that can agree on that would definitely make the most of all the resources the Savior offers.

Jesus, in his authority, provides us a sea full of hungry fish, but he does even more. He promises to be in the boat with us as we throw out our lines. He can be in a lot of boats at the same time, so don’t worry about being alone. Evidence of this promise is another thing that makes Acts so much fun to read. Jesus provided his witnesses the rod, the reel, the appropriate test line, the lure, the right drag, and the net for landing the big one, or the small one, or the one in between. How many people do you meet in Acts who had time to prepare their

¹¹ David Gates, “The Pop Prophets,” *Newsweek*, 24 May, 2004, p. 46

message before they delivered it? Jesus prepared them. He was with them giving them what to say, when to say it, and, I suspect, even how to say it.

Do you suppose Peter spent an hour in preparation for every minute of his delivery on Pentecost day? No, he let Jesus guide his cast and reeled in three thousand people. We've memorized, "Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12). Peter didn't have that as a memory verse. He just said it off the top of his head in front of a most unforgiving audience, the entire family of Annas, the High Priest. Jesus has promised you no less. Jesus can bring things out of our mouths worth memorizing if we just gave him the chance. Read what Jesus gave Stephen to say and get excited. You can preach sermons better than any of mine if that's what the "all" in front of you need. How I love Philip's, "Do you understand what you are reading?" (Acts 8:30). What a great lead question!

Understand Jesus is the master fisher of men. Having him at our side can only be described as an adventure. Sure, he died for all. But he also won a few to his kingdom during his earthly ministry. "In John 3 we find Jesus speaking about conversion to Nicodemus, a pious, wealthy and influential Jewish man. In the next chapter, John 4, Jesus talks about living water to a loose-living, poor and unimportant Samaritan woman. These two people could hardly be more opposite . . . God can call anyone to faith, regardless of where he or she may stand on the wide continuum between Nicodemus and the woman at the well."¹² Next Lent, be amazed at the conversions Jesus' accomplished even while hanging from the cross. This is the guy you have with you whenever you are among the "all." Don't hesitate when he gives you the urge to cast.

The promises with which Jesus surrounds his Great Commission are most encouraging. I would ask you not teach or even think about the Great Commission without them. If you want more encouragement I recommend a most enjoyable book called *Outreach Promises: God's Encouragement For Sharing Your Faith* by Philip M. Bickel.

My dear brothers, there are things we haven't read, things we haven't taken to heart, things we haven't tried, people we have not yet tapped, in regards to making disciples of all. I consider that very, very good news. We're not hopelessly stuck. We still have options, all kinds of them. I was pushed by this paper to discover this for myself. I pray that Jesus help me move an entire congregation to discover that. I've tried to be a blessing to you today. I know you can be a blessing to me. Finally, "my dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because your labor in the Lord is not in vain" (1 Cor. 15:58). Move forward with the mission of the Church. Grow your people so they can go with the Word. Then God can use us to gather his "all." He will add to our number daily those who are being saved.

Bibliography

- Barna, George, *Grow Your Church from the Outside In*. Ventura, CA: Regal Books From Gospel Light, 2002.
- Bickel, Philip M., *Outreach Promises: God's Encouragement for Sharing Your Faith*. St. Paul, MN: Roller Coaster Press, 1998.
- Christian Worship: A Lutheran Hymnal*. Milwaukee, WI: Northwestern Publishing House, 1993.
- Christians, Clifford, Earl J. Schipper, and Wesley Smedes, *Who in the World?* Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1972.
- Gates, David, "The Pop Prophets," *Newsweek*, 24 May, 2004, pp. 44-50.
- Heinecke, Paul T., Kent R. Hunter, and David S. Luecke, *Courageous Churches: Refusing Decline, Inviting Growth*. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1991.
- The Holy Bible: New International Version*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1984.
- Schaller, Lyle E, *Growing Plans: Strategies to Increase Your Church's Membership*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1985.
- School of Outreach*. Milwaukee, WI: The WELS Commission on Evangelism.

¹² Philip M. Bickel, *Outreach Promises: God's Encouragement for Sharing your Faith* (St. Paul, MN: Roller Coaster Press, 1998), p. 37.