

# Challenges Facing the WELS in 2001 and Beyond As it Seeks to Advance with the Gospel

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[Part of a larger essay entitled, “Forward in Christ—The Advance of the Gospel in the WELS 1850-2000”, Presented to the South Central District Convention, Dallas, TX, June 5-6, 2000]

In this article we will discuss ten outreach challenges, which can also be viewed as opportunities, that our church faces as we enter this new millennium.<sup>1</sup> They are not listed in any particular order. All of these items are under discussion at the present time and need to be wrestled with continually.

## 1. Maintaining a Proper Balance between Strengthening Our Stakes and Lengthening Our Cords

Serving in the area of ministerial education as I do, I know how costly our ministerial education system is. I also know first-hand the pressures being put on ministerial education to cut back on its spending, to forego new building programs or find different ways of financing them in the interest of expanding outreach with the gospel. I also serve on the Board for World Missions, and for a number of years I served in a congregation supported by the Board for Home Missions. So I also know by personal experience the importance of sufficient funding for mission outreach.

It strikes me, however—and I hope I’m not being too parochial here—that recently the pendulum seems to be swinging in the direction of lengthening our cords at the expense of strengthening our stakes through sufficient financial support of our ministerial education programs. For example, funding for needed facilities at our ministerial education schools, such as additional dormitory and classroom space to provide for growing enrollments, is becoming more and more dependent on increased student-generated revenues. Over the years in our church we have wisely seen the support of Christian education as a responsibility of the whole church, whether it be on the congregational or synodical level, not just of the “users.” In fact, one of our strengths over the years has been the support the *whole synod* offers to train its future workers. I would pray that this strong support continues. It would not be wise, in my opinion, to go too far in the direction of requiring our schools to become self-financing rather than synod-supported institutions.

## 2. Preparing Church Workers to Face the Unique Challenges That Lie Before Us

Recently, the Ministerial Education Curriculum Committee (MECC), consisting of the presidents of the four WELS worker training schools and chaired by the chairman of the Board for Ministerial Education took a bottom to top and top to bottom look at the entire ministerial education curriculum. The committee was formed by resolution of the synod’s Board for Ministerial Education and was charged “to develop a coordinated curriculum that will best meet the mission, objectives, and vision of the WELS” and “to make system-wide curriculum recommendations to the BME.” As MECC went about its work, it asked such questions as: What is the church looking for and what does it need in the pastors and teachers who will fill our classrooms and pulpits in the year 2000 AD and the years to come? How are we doing in producing these kinds of workers? What *dare not change* in our ministerial education program? What *might be changed* to make things work better? What, if anything, *must be changed* to produce candidates to serve in an ever-changing world? In carrying out this task we need to be flexible, yet without compromising the truths our fathers fought for and which God has graciously preserved in our midst.

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<sup>1</sup> This article is a part of a larger paper, “Forward in Christ—The Advance of the Gospel in the WELS 1850-2000.” The full article can be found at the WLS web site: <http://www.wls.wels.net>.

To illustrate, we might take an example from the pastor track of our ministerial education program. How much training is necessary for a man to serve as a pastor in one of our congregations? Over the years we have come to recognize the value of a solid liberal arts education to prepare students for entrance into the seminary. But does this mean that all need training in Latin and German and classical Greek, or at least the amount of training that we are presently providing? We have already waived these requirements for second career students. Are there other avenues to a classical liberal arts education? Should there be more choices for those who are following the traditional prep school (or area Lutheran high school), Martin Luther College, Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary route? This is just a small sampling of questions that need to be asked and answered as we seek to continue to advance with the gospel in the WELS.<sup>2</sup>

Also worth mentioning is that in recent times the synod, recognizing that the public ministry can take different forms as needs dictate, has begun several new programs designed to assist us in moving forward in Christ in the new millennium. I'm thinking, for example, of the staff ministry and early childhood education programs at Martin Luther College and also of the multi-ethnic pre-seminary program that is preparing men of minority cultures to enter the seminary.

Just recently a cross-cultural, cross-divisional committee consisting of members from the Board for Home Missions, Board for World Missions, and Board for Ministerial Education set up a program to train congregational "evangelists." This program is designed especially to fill needs in culturally diverse fields. The training for such a position is intended to take place almost entirely within the congregation. Upon completion of the required credits of course work (34 credits are envisioned at present), the congregation could, if it so desires, "certify" the person as a congregational "evangelist" and call the person to serve full- or part-time. Such a person would serve as an assistant to the pastor, but he would not occupy the pulpit since he would not be trained to write and preach sermons.

As the situation dictates, there may well be other forms of public ministry that we as a church body will find beneficial to create as we seek to move forward in Christ with the gospel in the years before us.

### **3. Growing in Our Ability to Do Cross-Cultural Mission Work, Especially in the Cities of North America**

The Wisconsin Synod started out as a church body consisting largely of rural congregations, with the exception of the many churches serving German immigrants in Milwaukee. Serving rural people, serving German speakers, that was our forte. Both groups are in relatively short supply today. The Germans have moved out of the areas of the city in which we established congregations one hundred and more years ago, and the number of people in rural areas continues to decline.

If we want to be able to work in the large cities, and increasingly the smaller cities and towns as well, we need to learn how to work among people of cultures different from our own, just as our forefathers needed to learn how to bring the gospel to their non-German neighbors. In a 1997 paper, "Unchurched Demographic Trends and WELS Perspectives," WELS evangelism administrator Robert Hartman lists larger cities in the United States (100,000 population and over) with a large non-Anglo population. Among them are such South Central District cities as Dallas 53.1%; Austin 38.8%; Corpus Christi 56.5%; Fort Worth 43.9%; Houston 56.1%; Oklahoma City 27.6%; and San Antonio 64.1%.

Much of this non-Anglo influx comes from recent immigration. Robert Samuelson, a contributing editor to *Newsweek* magazine and columnist for *The Washington Post*, in an editorial that appeared May 4, 2000, in the *Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel*, talked about the effect that immigration is having on our nation. He mentioned that the Census Bureau projects that by 2025 immigrants will comprise 12% of the population of the United States and that their American-born children will conservatively comprise another 12-13%. That's about 25%, one-fourth of the population of the United

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<sup>2</sup> Since the writing of this essay MECC has completed its study. Its report and recommendations have been adopted by the boards of control of each of the four ministerial education schools, the Board for Ministerial Education, and the Conference of Presidents.

States projected to be immigrants or first generation children of immigrants 25 years from now. (That is the case already today in California, where one in four residents is foreign born).

Where are these immigrants coming from? In 1970, 62% of all immigrants came from Europe and 9% from Canada (about seven out of ten of all immigrants). Arriving from Europe and Canada, these were more or less “our kind of people.” In 1997, however, 51% of immigrants came from Latin America and 27% from Asia. Almost eight out of ten immigrants today are no longer “our kind of people.” Most importantly, they are people who do not know God, or, if they do, they do not know what he has done for them. What a potential mission field this immigrant population is!

It can and should be said that we are making a determined effort to learn how to work in the big city and also among people of different cultures, African-American, Hispanic, and Asian in particular. Some fine work is being done in the African-American community in Milwaukee by pastors and congregations that have determined to remain in the central city and work among and with the people who live there. We are taking some baby steps in Hispanic work in such places as Miami and Milwaukee’s near-Southside. We are working among the Asian population in such places as Houston, Minneapolis, Manitowoc, and in some of the university communities. We are offering a heavily-subscribed cross-cultural elective to our students at Martin Luther College. We are giving our seminary students opportunity for cross-cultural experience through participation in the African-American Milwaukee Northside Lutheran Ministries and its Southside Hispanic Ministries counterpart. We have given one of our pastors, Allen Sorum of Milwaukee’s Garden Homes Lutheran Church, time off for study on urban ministry. The document that is the result of his study, “Mission and Ministry Across North America,” is helping to guide us in our cross-cultural work. We have just assigned two seminary graduates to a team ministry in New York City.

Yet, even with the progress we have made, there remains much to learn and much to do. May the Lord of the church move and enable us to continue with this all-important work.

#### **4. Learning How to Approach a Postmodern Society with the Gospel**

Some are calling our contemporary society a postmodern society. Postmodernism is clearly a strong ally of Satan because it is a philosophy that denies that there is such a thing as truth (except presumably, for the assertion that truth does not exist, which statement, so far as I can figure out, is “true” to a postmodernist). Gene Vieth writes in his book *Postmodern Times*: “The new generation of college graduates has been immersed in this kind of thinking. Our new teachers, journalists, lawyers, judges, and political leaders have been indoctrinated. Many of them are coming out convinced there is no objective meaning and that truth is nothing more than an act of power” (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1994, p. 56).

Pastor Steven Degner, in an essay, “Postmodernism and the Gospel,” delivered in 1999 to the Arizona-California District Pastoral Conference, speaks of the frustration of a guest lecturer at the University of California-Santa Barbara, as he taught a course on the philosophy of history to a class of students who had been imbued with postmodernist kind of thinking. The lecturer, Jeffrey Russell, writes:

I tried in vain to get the class to admit that the Sistine Chapel was better than a stick figure I scrawled on the board, that a Bach cantata was better than my toneless humming, that King Lear was better than Roses are Red, Violets are Blue. No way. Some people, they replied, might prefer the stick figure or the greeting card sentiments. One young woman in the class was particularly bright and later went on to a successful career as a lawyer. She was an oboe player in the Santa Barbara Symphony.... I had never done more than look at [an oboe]. I challenged her to bring her oboe, and we’d see whether it was possible to determine whose playing was better. “Some people might prefer the way you played,” she responded.... At the end of the term, the young woman turned in the best paper in the class. I gave her an A ... and she was delighted. But what if I had taken her at her word? What if I had told her, “You are getting a C

along with everyone else, because there is no basis on which to judge one paper better than another”?

According to the postmodernist, even words themselves have no objective meaning. The May 22, 2000, issue of *U.S. News and World Report* gives a graphic example of this. Columnist John Leo writes:

The scheduling of a picnic to honor Baseball Hall of Famer Jackie Robinson led to a furor over alleged racism at the State University of New York-Albany. Some 40 students at the university insisted that the word “picnic” originally referred to the racial lynchings of blacks. They were wrong. Picnic comes from a 17<sup>th</sup>-century French word for a social gathering in which each person brings a different food. But in reply to the 40 protesters, affirmative action director Zaheer Mustafa put out a memo asking all student leaders to refrain from any use of the word picnic. “Whether the claims are true or not, the point is the word offended,” he said. In publicity for the event honoring Robinson the word picnic was changed to “outing.” This offended gay students, so the event formally known as “picnic” was publicized without a noun describing what was going on.

It is not hard to see that such a philosophy, which blatantly denies the existence of truth and maintains that words mean only what you want them to mean, presents a challenge to the Christian message, for the Christian message consists of words and it testifies that there is such a thing as truth. In fact, not only do we claim that truth exists, but we maintain that Jesus is *the* truth (John 14:6) and that his Word not only *contains* truth but *is* truth (John 17:17).

It strikes me that we are more comfortable in and adept at refuting errors found in Reformed theology and Roman Catholic theology, which maintain that there is such a thing as truth, than we are in facing a philosophy which doesn’t even say, “I won’t believe it until you prove it,” but rather states that nothing can be proven because truth per se does not exist.

Learning how to approach a postmodern society with the gospel is certainly a major challenge facing all Christians in general and us of the WELS in particular.

## **5. Utilizing More Fully the Vast Reservoir of Laymen and Laywomen in the Home and World Mission Program of the Church**

### **Priesthood of Believers**

We mentioned earlier that one of the blessings of the synod’s study of the Scriptures on the subject of church and ministry in the early 1900s was that the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers was put into sharper focus. While not every Christian is a public minister of the gospel, if you are a Christian you are a priest of God to whom the Lord has given the commission to “declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light” (1 Peter 2: 9).

### **Participation in the Governing of the Church**

We are still growing into a full appreciation and practical application of this truth, but we have, by God’s grace, come a long ways since 1850 when the Wisconsin Synod was organized as the German Evangelical Lutheran *Ministerium* of Wisconsin. We began as a church body that was for the most part controlled by and run by the pastors.

That has changed. Today, for example, of the 21 members of the Synodical Council, twelve are laymen, one from each district of the synod. Laymen thus form the majority of the Synodical Council, which is responsible for planning the synod’s work and for preparing the synod’s program and budget to present to the

synod convention. The synod convention likewise has a larger lay involvement today than in the past. By synodical resolution 50% of the delegates are required to be laymen.

In my opinion this is a most healthy development, an indication that the pastors of the synod have confidence in the ability of the laity to serve the Lord capably and responsibly and that lay people recognize that they, too, are a vital part of our church body who have gifts that can and should be utilized for the advancement of the gospel.

### **Lay Evangelism**

A major emphasis on the use of laymen and laywomen in outreach with the gospel began with a memorial to a synod convention from the Milwaukee City Pastoral Conference. The memorial requested that the synod create a synodical evangelism committee. It spoke of the laity as “a vast, unused reservoir for personal evangelism work.” It mentioned “our present pastoral shortage” which “emphasizes the urgent need of employing our laity for this work.” The 1957 synod convention received this memorial favorably and created a synodical evangelism committee.

Not long thereafter each district also formed an evangelism committee, the Michigan District being for some years the most active and creative. Materials emanating from this district such as “Talk About the Savior” were distributed and used throughout the synod.

In 1984, the synod called its first full-time evangelism administrator, Pastor Paul Kelm, who was subsequently replaced by Pastor Robert Hartman. And in the same year the call the undersigned received from the seminary asked him to teach, in addition to New Testament, pastoral theology with emphasis in evangelism. Professor Daniel Leyrer is now working into that position.

Yet, in spite of much effort that has gone into giving laymen and laywomen the opportunity to be trained in evangelism, it strikes me that what Pastor Reuel Schulz, former chairman of the WELS Commission on Evangelism, said in a 1978 paper entitled, “Evangelism in the WELS,” would still have to be said today. Schulz writes: “It seems to me that most of the rank and file members of our church body remain uninvolved, unchallenged, and untrained in evangelism in the narrow sense of personal proclamation of the gospel to the non-Christian.” At pastoral conferences, I often ask the pastors present, “How many of you utilize the gifts of some of your lay people in making calls on visitors to the church and other ‘prospects’?” Usually the percentage of pastors who say they do this is quite small. We still have work to do in utilizing more fully this “vast reservoir for personal mission work” in our congregations.

### **Kingdom Workers**

Another most promising use of lay people in mission work in recent years has centered in the work being done by WELS Kingdom Workers. It was in 1987 that the synod convention encouraged the organization of the lay organization that became Kingdom Workers. In 1988, in Muskego, WI, Kingdom Workers was formally organized, and in 1989 it was registered with the State of Wisconsin as a non-profit corporation.

Kingdom Workers works very closely with the Boards for Home and World Missions. It will, in fact, carry on no projects that have not been approved by one of these two boards. In recent years, in addition to providing funds to finance non-budgetary mission programs, Kingdom Workers has been supplying lay volunteers for short-term service in both home and world mission fields. At the end of 1999 our 120-person world mission team included 30 lay volunteers. Builders for Christ, which began in 1990, and is a part of Kingdom Workers, provides people power to construct buildings for our home mission congregations at considerable savings to the congregations.

We also could include here the work of the women of our synod in establishing and maintaining the Central Africa Medical Mission, concerning which we will have more to say below.

## 6. Increasing the Movement towards Full Indigeneity on the Part of Our World Mission Churches

It is truly a blessing of God that we are now working in 24 different mission fields. Yet we have touched just the tip of the iceberg. Of the six billion people now living on earth, only around 20% of them embrace Christianity.

We cannot reach all of these people, of course, but we can perhaps reach more than we are at present. The number of missionaries we can send out, however, and the number of dollars available for mission outreach are limited. One way to expand our world mission outreach, therefore, is to bring our current mission fields to a point where they can function on their own, or at least with a minimal level of assistance from the WELS.

As of this date, none of our world mission fields has become a totally indigenous church body (defined as a self-administering, self-propagating, self-financing, and self-disciplining church). The Board for World Missions is addressing that issue at the current time. Through its Committee for Mission Expansion (CME) it recently prepared and sent out to each mission field a form entitled "Measuring Progress toward Indigeneity." This measuring tool contains 28 "benchmarks" that the missionaries on the field, together with the national church, are asked to rank on a scale of 1-7 to indicate where the field is at present in achieving the particular benchmark.

The CME will be studying each of the mission fields' responses to these 28 benchmarks. Then it will formulate a plan of action and take it to the entire BWM.<sup>3</sup> Please join in prayer that we see a growing number of our world mission fields reach the point of near or total indigeneity that we might re-deploy our missionaries and utilize our world mission dollars in other areas desperately needing the gospel.

## 7. Properly Using Humanitarian Aid in the Cause of Missions

Providing humanitarian aid on the mission field is nothing new for the WELS. The roots of the East Fork Nursery (now closed) in our Apache Mission go back into the 1920s. In 1957 the synod in convention approved the opening of a medical mission in Africa, and in 1961 the Lumano (now called the Mwembezi) Lutheran Dispensary was opened outside of Lusaka, Zambia. In 1970 this work was expanded to Malawi, when a medical dispensary was set up on a site on the shore of Lake Malawi. (In 1982 the headquarters of the Lutheran Mobile Clinic, as it has come to be known, was moved to Lilongwe, the capital of Malawi.) Supported especially by the women of the WELS, the medical mission in Africa has continued in operation until this day. Many faithful nurses from the WELS have served in these medical missions over the years, putting into practice the words of Jesus, "I was sick and you looked after me" (Matthew 25:36).

The writer of the chapter on WELS mission work in Africa in *To Every Nation, Tribe, Language, and People* comments on the blessings of our humanitarian work in central Africa:

How well has the medical program served its stated purpose as an arm of the mission? The program stands in its own right as a ministry of mercy and compassion. An older African one day told one of our nurses, "If you were not here, we would be dying like flies." As an arm of the mission the medical program has shown the love of Christ to the people and in this way has helped break down some barriers to the gospel.

Not to be forgotten is the direct gospel ministry carried on at the clinics through the daily devotions in God's Word led by men like the now sainted Solomon Bimbe, the spiritual counsel for the ailing and their families, as well as the emergency baptisms of many babies at the clinics. A small chapel was set up in the Lumano Dispensary for providing spiritual counsel and comfort. The angels of heaven have been given good reason to rejoice at the healing of souls as well as of bodies that has occurred through the years in the medical mission program (p.198).

<sup>3</sup> At its October 2000 meeting the BWM resolved that representatives of the CME meet with each of the BWM's five administrative committees to review the results of this survey. The administrative committees will then work with the fields under their care to address issues needing special attention.

Recently, in 1998, the BWM resolved to create a Humanitarian Aid Committee with the threefold purpose of 1.) encouraging and promoting humanitarian work in our various world mission fields within the parameters established by the BWM; 2.) assisting and advising the administrative committees with regard to questions of fund raising and administration so that humanitarian work does not become a major, time-consuming issue for the administrative committees or the missionaries; and 3.) evaluating all humanitarian efforts in our world mission fields from the perspective of their balance, effectiveness, or possible hindrance to the Means of Grace ministry.

All three of these purposes are important, as was brought out nicely in a paper presented by Missionary John Sullivan in 1996 to the WELS world mission conference in Puerto Plata, Dominican Republic. After clearly bringing out that “the objective of our mission activity is to make and nurture disciples for Christ through the preaching of the gospel,” Missionary Sullivan then pointed to the benefits of engaging in humanitarian efforts on the world mission field. Among the benefits he lists the following:

- If our light shines before men, they will see our good deeds and perhaps ultimately praise our Father in heaven.
- A charitable assistance program provides a point of contact for the gospel, a bridge, or approach, to bring Christ to the unbeliever.
- Humanitarian aid can reassure suspicious authorities, who cannot appreciate the treasure we are offering with the gospel. In this way it also serves the preaching of the gospel by helping to create a climate in which we can peacefully proclaim the message of salvation.

Sullivan also lists certain dangers and pitfalls to be avoided:

- There is the danger that an ongoing charitable program can gradually demand more and more time, attention, energy, and money, resulting in a shift from the mission’s main purpose and objective, the saving of souls. Since this is more visible than the spiritual rescue that the gospel effects, it can easily come to be perceived as more important.
- Humanitarian aid can sometimes backfire. It may be perceived by others as a deceitful means to an end. The line between building bridges and buying allegiance is not always easy to see, especially when we cannot be sure what the recipient is thinking.
- The reputation of our humanitarian services may become so great that we become known as the church or mission that distributes mission supplies, does pregnancy counseling, runs food stores, etc., rather than the church that preaches the gospel and offers comfort, forgiveness, and eternal hope to sinners.

What Missionary Sullivan writes about humanitarian efforts on the world mission field applies equally to our work here in the United States. The continual challenge before us will be to keep a proper balance. May the Lord give us wisdom to keep on a course that continues to give priority to the needs of people’s souls without neglecting the needs of their bodies.

## 8. Using Alternate Mission Methods to Reach the Otherwise Unreachable

In a brief paper written in 1990, entitled “Embryonic Thoughts on Alternate Mission Methods,” now-sainted BWM member Pastor Leonard Koeninger wrote, “With rising costs of placing expatriates in a field and with some countries increasingly difficult to enter, it would appear that alternate mission methods ought to be explored and considered.” He then listed some possible alternate mission strategies. With our Lord’s return drawing closer with every passing day, it has become increasingly important that we become more and more creative in our attempts to bring the gospel to as many people as possible, including those living in areas closed to traditional mission work, nations such as China and the various Muslim countries of the world.

If Pastor Koeninger were alive today, he would undoubtedly be pleased to see that the BWM has adopted many of his suggestions and has added even more. The following are some of the alternate mission strategies being utilized today to one degree or another by the BWM, or that are at least under consideration. In some situations they are being utilized in conjunction with our traditional expatriate-missionary-onsite-approach and in others as stand-alone strategies.

- Sending short-term teaching or outreach missionaries to assist a national church. This is being done in such countries as Cuba, Haiti, Nigeria, Cameroon, and in Scandinavia.
- Sending lay persons for a special ministry complementing field mission work. As mentioned previously, at the end of 1999 thirty WELS lay people were serving as volunteers in several of our world mission fields. This is one of the most exciting developments in recent years. It has the potential to grow greatly.
- Sending a team for a limited time to explore opportunities for outreach. This has become the standard approach for entering a new field. After a two-year exploratory period, a decision is made whether or not to enter the field permanently. A few years back Thailand became an official mission of WELS after such a two-year exploration.
- Training nationals in the United States for evangelizing their home country. This is a major element of our outreach to international students on U. S. campuses—to help international converts to Christianity to become informal missionaries when they return to their own countries.
- Christian Information Centers, bookstores, etc. We are following this approach in several countries, e.g., Colombia, Bulgaria, Russia.
- Christian Correspondence Program. The idea is to connect individual WELS members with inquirers around the world and to let them share the gospel with them via correspondence. This is still in the embryonic stage of development.
- Regular two-week (or more) teaching seminars. This is being done to assist with work in such countries as Russia, Bulgaria, Japan, and India. Forward in Christ offerings will enable us to expand this program.
- Developing new radio and/or TV programs. A proposal for a world-wide WELS radio program is before the BWM right now.

- Outreach via the WELS web-site. A Russian-speaking young man from Estonia who has begun training in our Northern European seminary program came into contact with WELS via the internet.
- Managing a school for the government. We are doing this in Hong Kong. In addition, some of our WELS members have served as teachers (and informal missionaries) in public or private schools in such places as Thailand, Indonesia, and Colombia. The BWM is seeking two couples right now to teach in the United Arab Emirates, a Muslim country.
- Study and outreach centers. This has become a major way by which we carry out our work in Hong Kong and in several other countries.
- Business person outreach. The idea, not yet implemented, is to provide some basic cross-cultural and evangelism training for WELS businessmen and businesswomen who spend time overseas, especially for those whose work takes them to countries where we are unable to send missionaries. As the opportunity arises, they could in an informal way share the gospel with people.
- Bible translators. This is another idea that is yet to be implemented: To send translation teams into areas that as yet have no Bible in their language. They would work among the people, learn their language, and gradually put the Word of God into the tongue of those among whom they are living.
- Distribution of Christian literature. In 1996 the Board for World Missions formed a Multi-Language Publications Committee. The committee was asked to “provide a comprehensive listing and production of confessional Christian literature and other mass media in the languages of countries where the WELS is working and other areas or language groups where we may never work.” Under the capable leadership of its project coordinator, retired pastor and missionary Harold Essmann, in less than five years this program has, among other things,
  - established a large database of foreign language materials known as the World Mission Collection, housed in the library of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary
  - translated and published books and other literature in as many as 22 languages
  - supported the establishment of translation teams in five different languages.

It is truly amazing what has been accomplished within this short time span.

There may well be other alternate mission strategies to pursue. The intent is that, as the Apostle Paul put it, “by all possible means” we might save some (1 Corinthians 9:22).

## **9. Holding On to Our Biblical, Confessional Lutheran Theology**

This essay has been about moving forward in Christ, about the advance of the gospel in the WELS during the first 150 years of our existence. We need to continually remind ourselves that the only way we can

move forward in a God-pleasing manner is to move forward *in Christ*, that is, within the framework of his will and Word. And we dare not forget that the only God-pleasing advance is the advance of *the gospel*.

Satan will always be tempting us to take shortcuts, to adopt the ways of the world to produce outward, external results. God, however, works in only one way: through the gospel in his Word and Sacraments. Such is the teaching of the Scriptures. Such, therefore, is the testimony of our Lutheran Confessions, as Luther so solemnly insists in the Smalcald Articles: “We should and must constantly maintain that God will not deal with us except through his external Word and Sacrament” (Part III, art. VIII, 10).

Get the Word out. Let the gospel advance to ever-widening circles of people. That’s what it means to move forward in Christ. Let God “worry” about the results. We plant the seed; God makes it grow. We let down the net; God fills it. The Word will produce its own results because the almighty God himself stands behind it.

### **10. Recognizing That We Are Working Against the Clock**

“Night is coming, when no one can work,” Jesus tells us (John 9:4). Recognizing this to be true, our WELS *World Mission Handbook* states: “Our King’s business requires haste. The time for doing the Lord’s bidding in an intensive mission program is running out. The Lord, who has placed the sacred trust of his Word into our hands, has also blessed us with religious freedom, peace, and material blessings. His faithful followers will heed his warning and redouble their efforts to preach the gospel in all the world before it is too late.”

In *To Every Nation, Tribe, Language and People*, the first administrator of the WELS Board for World Missions, Edgar Hoenecke, quotes an old German field marshal by the name of Bluecher: “Our battle cry must always be ‘Vorwärts!’” (p. 279)—forward in Christ with the gospel while there still is time. May the Lord give us continuing zeal and means for this, *the* work of the church.

#### **For Further Reading:**

*To Every Nation, Tribe, Language, and People—A Century of WELS Missions*, multiple authors  
(Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1992).

*The History of the Wisconsin Synod [1850-1930]*, by John Philip Koehler (St. Cloud, MN: Sentinel Publishing Company, 1970).

*Continuing in His Word*, a history of WELS 1850-1950 (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 1951).

*You and Your Synod* (Milwaukee: WELS Board for Parish Education, 1961).

*The Wisconsin Synod Lutherans*, by Edward C. Fredrich (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 1992).