

October 7, 2009

Greetings From President Walton....



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Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

During this month when we once again celebrate the Reformation, it's a great opportunity for us to reflect on our life together as God's Church. Our goal should never be that, as the Church of the Reformation, we still continue to do things the way they did during Luther's day. In fact, quite the opposite, wasn't part of the reason that Luther began his life-changing movement a direct reaction to some of the harmful traditions of the church of his day? Informed by the living and breathing Word of God, Luther sought to make a difference for the sake of Jesus. No longer did he want people to remain in bondage to their sin, in bondage to their fear, nor in bondage to the church. In fact, even to this day we use as a lectionary selection those wonderful words from John 8, "You shall know the truth and the truth will set you free. ...So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed!" That freedom belongs to all who trust in Jesus!

Recently the Fall Pastoral Conference met in Jacksonville, Florida. Our theme was, "Culturally Relevant in Light of the Cross." Using the book, *UnChristian*, by David Kinnamon, as our guide, we had two phenomenal speakers, Oscar Bienvidas and Dien Taylor, who are serving in metropolitan areas, Dallas and the Bronx, respectively, and are fully Lutheran, but also ministering in culturally relevant ways. Among other things, we learned that ministry to the so called "Buster" and "Mosaic" generations is significantly different than it was to the "Hero" or "Boomers" that so many in our churches, and to which so many of our workers, belong. In the past, there was at least a civil view toward the church. In an ever increasing pluralistic society, we have no more or less regard than buddhism or the local art museum. The generation has a lack of interest in each. With regard to the Church, Kinnamon found through careful research that many in these generations view the church as judgmental, homophobic, hypocritical and just plain boring.

The real question is how do we reach these folks with the good news of Jesus without compromising His Word and our heritage? The

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truth is, we come out of a heritage of change. Luther saw the religious landscape of his day, and saw that the church was losing people. "Luther, The Movie," which was released about 5 years ago, did a great job, in my opinion, of "humanizing" Luther. We saw the man who faced struggles and who truly cared about people, not to mention the grace of God for us in Jesus Christ. One of my favorite scenes in the movie is when Luther approaches some members of his parish who have not been to worship. When he lovingly confronts them, he learns that they have been sold indulgences, and their understanding is that because of that they have a guarantee of eternity and don't need to worry about worship. Luther is broken hearted about the misguided faith of his parishioners, but angry that they were misguided by the church. It brought about a realization that it was time for a change---not just for change sake, but to reach people for Jesus Christ.

Thus it is in our day! If we're to reach this current generation with the Gospel of Jesus Christ, it's pretty obvious that we can longer do business as usual. We can't "do" church like they did in our grandparent's day, or for that matter like in Luther's day. What Luther developed was appropriate for his generation and the time in which God placed him. The world has drastically changed, and one of the last vestiges holding on to past glory days is the church. There is still an expectation on the part of many, especially in main line denominations, of which the LCMS is still a part, that "if we build it, they will come." That may have worked in "Field of Dreams," but we are truly dreaming if we continue to think that way looking at the challenging and changing world around us.

Right now we live in a day when there are more diverse people in the States of Florida and Georgia than ever before. The world has literally come to our doorstep, but often our approach is to chase them away from the church door. There was a day when the church in the United States sent out more missionaries than anywhere else. Today, we are the third largest mission field in the world. How will we respond? Will we allow ourselves to continue on as in the past and become completely irrelevant to the point of extinction? The devil wants to render us completely useless to the proclamation of the Gospel. Peter would write to a fear-filled church, "Be on your guard, be alert, your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, looking for someone to devour. Resist him, standing firm in your faith." If Satan can keep us distracted long enough, we'll never

fulfill that great Reformation commission, to tell the world the good news about God's free grace to us in Jesus Christ!

Jesus said that He would build His Church and the gates of hell would not prevail against it. So often, I believe, we have seen this in light of defending the church. It's as if we were stacking furniture against the doors and boarding up our stained glass windows to protect the church. Let me tell you, we don't need to protect God's Church. I believe that God can do that all by Himself without our help. What He desires from us is faithfulness in proclaiming Jesus and our new life in Him. I think Luther understood what Jesus was really talking about here. Rather than guarding the church, Jesus was calling us to storm the gates of hell, and keep Satan on the run. The Church should be tearing down the devil's strongholds with the power of the Gospel. Paul tells us that the weapons we fight with aren't normal (2 Cor 10:4) but they have divine power to destroy and foil Satan's plot—his strongholds. But weapons are useless if there aren't people empowered to use them. Those people are us! We are God's chosen instruments to storm the gates of hell in the name of Jesus so that many will come to know the love, forgiveness and grace of Jesus in our day.

As we celebrate the Reformation this year, may it be a time for us to reflect on how we "do" Church. Will this year's celebration simply be another rehearsing of our history, reminding us of the past, without inspiring us for the future? Or will it be an opportunity to take what is so great about our heritage and make it current so we can reach more people for the sake of Jesus? Will we make any changes in how we do things to reach a new generation with the timeless story of God's grace and love?

Why not make this year a year of true Reformation? To reach this generation we have to become outwardly focused. We need to understand the needs in our communities, and then respond, not to build up our churches, but because we genuinely care because we know that Jesus cares. If we truly want to exercise our faith in Jesus, we need to put it into practice. Then, the authenticity will touch hearts and lives as they see Jesus living in us.

We have a wonderful heritage. Sola Gratia! Sola Fides! Sola Scriptura! What are we going to do about it? Jesus didn't die to make us comfortable and happy. He commissioned us to go and share His love with the world. Luther didn't challenge the church to form a

new denomination or to secure his place in history. He was passionate about his love for Jesus and his desire for others to know the grace of God which is ours in Jesus. That kind of passion will reach the Busters and Mosaics, who are truly searching for something of worth. We happen to believe that the greatest worth is Jesus. May He inform us so that He can reform us as we celebrate this Reformation Day!

In His awesome grace,

Greg

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"The love of Christ urges us on." 2 Corinthians 5:14

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