

CONFESSIONAL LUTHERANISM IN GHANA

For the Sake of the Gospel

How did it all get started? It began with several visits to Our Father's Evangelical Lutheran Church in Greenfield, WI, by the Rev. John Fehrmann. As the congregation became familiar with the work of The CLEF, there was a growing interest in sending their pastor to help train pastors in other countries to be faithful to the Gospel and the Lutheran Confessions. They began to think that this would be a good opportunity to send their pastor whom they had supported to earn a doctorate to hand down the faith once delivered to the saints as a true doctor, that is, a teacher applying the healing medicine of the Gospel. The project began with one individual beginning to raise funds to send me to an undisclosed location. Despite limited initial details and no specific country, the members supported the effort. Although it took about 18 months to accumulate the funds, they were finally there. The elders of the congregation encouraged me and the voters endorsed the idea of sending me to teach other confessional Lutheran pastors. With the funds in place and the congregation's support we were ready to move forward.

Then, in late January of this year I received a call from Pastor Fehrmann asking me to go to Ghana and teach a class on preaching. I needed to get a visa and the Hepatitis A and B shots and prepare for two weeks in July. Although most members of the congregation had no idea where Ghana was I began to familiarize them with its location and some general facts about our fellow Lutherans. In many ways I did not really know what to expect when I stepped on the plane for Ghana on the Fourth of July.

What did I find in Ghana? Did I find people "on fire" for Jesus and accomplishing miracles? Did I find a thriving, successful organization filled with testimonies of their progress? The truth is I found a small Lutheran church body that is eager to deepen its identity as a confessing Lutheran church in a country that desperately needs the Gospel. I found a church body that believes that they are to proclaim the Gospel in its truth and purity and administer the Sacraments according to the Word of Christ.

The Evangelical Lutheran Church of Ghana (ELCG) has many of the same challenges we face in the United States. They are surrounded by Evangelical and

Pentecostal churches that proclaim the Christianity of success and offer miracles and healings. These are attractive things in a country that has a great deal of poverty and a very limited health care system. These preach a kingdom of God on earth that leaves people hungry for more in the end. The Lutherans preach Christ crucified, the message that the kingdom comes through the cross and resurrection.

One of the struggles with which we are familiar is in the area of worship. As Lutherans they are stressing the Catechism and hymnal as the tools to daily strengthen faith as opposed to human experiences that offer fleeting emotional satisfaction. Faith comes by hearing and is strengthened by the Holy Spirit through Word and Sacrament. Worship is not man's work to please God, but the place where God gives His gifts to men. This is the Divine Service. While they are still using the old Lutheran Hymnal from 1941 they are in the process of producing an updated hymnal with the assistance of The CLEF. The English version of liturgy and



hymns will appear first, and then it will be translated into four main language groups to be used throughout the country. One of the weaknesses of the mission efforts in Ghana was the failure to recognize the need to provide translations of the liturgy and hymns. The absence of translations of good hymns has left open the door for some of the “evangelical or contemporary Christian music” with all its emotion driven, false, man-centered worship. In some areas the liturgy is not used as faithfully because pastors have felt the pressure “to do what works,” that is to imitate the evangelicals and charismatics with their false teachings. President Paul Fynn and the professors at the seminary are dedicated to strengthening the Lutheran faith in Ghana. They know this can only be done when they use liturgy and hymns that faithfully confess Biblical teachings. The hymnal that is being prepared will be a great tool for the pastors and an important devotional aid for their members.

Just as our congregation faces financial challenges because many do not trust the Gospel, so the congregations there are facing the difficulty of paying their pastors and supporting the work of the congregation. It is easy to rationalize this at times because they have so little to start with, but they are to provide for the preaching of the Gospel in their midst. The worries over money affect pastors and members alike as they become entangled in the thorns that threaten to choke them out at times as Jesus says in the parable of the Sower. There are some congregations in the poorer, dry northern region that have not had the Sacrament in over a year because they cannot afford to purchase wine and unleavened bread for the Sacrament. The shortage of money is depriving them of the very weapon they need to fight the worries over what they will eat and drink. For when we eat and drink at the Lord’s Supper, our faith is strengthened by the Gospel promise

that though we share in His sufferings we will also share in His bodily resurrection.

While I was in Accra with its three million plus people, the majority of the congregations and pastors are in the north. When the LC-MS began mission work, they started in the north and that is still the majority of the church. Of the church’s six different regions, 17 of the 33 pastors are in the north region. There are also a large number of trained evangelists that help the pastors care for all the widely scattered congregations.

I was teaching preaching to eleven men at the seminary ranging in age from 27 to 58 and coming from all over the country. They are married and leave their homes and families to study for four years to become preachers of the Gospel. They live in two small dorm rooms and sleep on bunk beds with mosquito netting. They study in English texts that have been donated from pastors’ libraries in the US. They have a wide variety of English skills that presents a challenge when dealing with English texts of the Scripture. They are not used to examining the text beyond the surface meaning. Part of the challenge was to help them see the Bible as more than a code book for living as the evangelical and charismatic preachers stress. Instead, the Scriptures are about the crucified and risen Lord and the good news that we have been justified by grace alone through faith in Christ alone. Thus they will be called to preach repentance and forgiveness of sins to their people just as the Apostles were (Luke 24:44-48).

For five hours a day we worked on developing the skills needed to examine and preach a specific text. These men have a real desire to be faithful to that task. Over the course of our two weeks together they came a long way. They also realized that the preaching task involves a lot of hard work. I

gave them assignments that required them to devote three to four hours a night minimum to dealing with the challenges of various texts that they will have to preach. We talked about the importance of hymn selection and the use of the liturgy and catechism to support the weekly preaching to the congregation. I helped them learn the importance of using a specific series of readings to guide their preaching. We even talked about the reason for a Christian church year and the importance of the weekly rhythm of the Divine Service and a pastor's daily life in God's Word. In addition, they had the opportunity to hear me preach while I was there.

I have many stories about life in Ghana and what I learned about this country and Africa, but those are all secondary to the importance of teaching the faith and the joy of seeing men and women in another part of the world confessing the faith we have all learned from the catechism, sung in hymns and liturgy, heard preached from the pulpit, seen as children are declared forgiven in the waters of Holy Baptism, and had strengthened as we knelt at the altar to receive from our Lord the precious gift of His body and blood for the forgiveness of sins. This opportunity was enjoyable even though it was hard work. My congregation did not send me there to take a vacation or go sightseeing. They did not send me to change the social conditions in Ghana or the society in which they live. They sent me on a mission to teach the faith once delivered to the saints.

Was it worth the expense of \$5,000 raised through the diligent efforts of some of you? The answer from the professors and the students is yes. They urged me to convey their thankfulness to my congregation for their willingness to let their pastor go to preach and teach in an unfamiliar portion of the world for the sake of the Gospel. They were greatly encouraged by this gift to them and by the

common faith that binds us together through Christ Jesus our Lord.

I would greatly encourage more congregations who have well-trained pastors to bring in Pastor Fehrmann and consider this good work of love. In a day and age when many talk about "mission" as if it involves bureaucracies, this is a real mission for a congregation to tackle. You can send a preacher in response to Paul's question: How will they hear without a preacher? Through this good work you are multiplying the number of preachers so that faith can come to others through the preaching of the Gospel that is the true power of God. Your dollars do not support nameless, faceless men in an office, but go directly to the proclamation of the Gospel. The money is used to pay for a plane flight, feed and house the teacher, and any remaining balance is applied directly to CLEF projects in that area (i.e., the hymnal in Ghana). I have been asked to return to Ghana and this time it will not be done through fundraisers, but through the mission dollars of our congregation for the sake of the Gospel. This congregation has discovered that confessing belief in the holy catholic (i.e., universal or Christian) church is not an abstract statement but a real connection with brothers in Christ through the common bond of love for the proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Pastor Fabrizius
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