

# **Missional God Outside the Box: Law/Promise and Congregational Vocation**

Mary Sue Dehmlow Dreier, Ph.D.

Crossings Int'l Conference, Oct. 22, 2008

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Luke 10:29-33 – *But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?” Jesus replied, “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he had compassion on him.”*

Thank you for the invitation to be here. Although I have not previously been part of this Crossings community, I share your commitments to explore, as the subtitle to your conference says, “why Luther’s distinction of Law and Gospel matters more than ever.” I believe with you that it does. These matters are at the core of the Lutheran confessional calling to be missional church in our world today. David Bosch, noted missionary theologian from South Africa, suggested in a small monograph published posthumously that it will be especially important for mission in the 21<sup>st</sup> century for churches to be clear and articulate about their confessional grounding.<sup>1</sup> I do hope that, despite my relative unfamiliarity with the insights and complexities of the Crossings law/promise matrix, I might be able to contribute to the conversation with the work that I’m doing both in my research and in the classroom. Specifically, I would like to suggest in this paper that the law/promise distinction motivates and shapes missional congregations to take up their vocation to be public companions with God in civil society.

We begin with the offertory prayer familiar to many of us:

*O Lord our God, maker of all things. Through your goodness you have blessed us with these gifts. With them we offer ourselves to your service and dedicate our lives to the care and redemption of all that you have made, for the sake of him who gave himself for us. Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*<sup>2</sup>

In this prayer members of a congregation dedicate themselves to their baptismal vocations of working for the “care and redemption” of creation. So what does this mean? What does it mean to carry a cross, to live life for the neighbor? This question is addressed by us as

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<sup>1</sup> David J. Bosch, *Believing in the Future: Toward a Missiology of Western Culture* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 1995), 44.

<sup>2</sup> Inter-Lutheran Commission on Worship, *Lutheran Book of Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House; Philadelphia: Board of Publication, Lutheran church in America, 1978), 69.

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individual “Christ-trusters,” of course, but I am also—and specifically in my research—interested in how this happens in the institutional dimension of *congregational life*. The congregation is the institutional setting in which we come to know God truly—and the congregation is where faith-formed neighbor love publicly addresses the assaults of the devil and the world. Beyond individualistic efforts, how might congregations turn their attention to the care of their communities in the face of those assaults? How might they live hospitably with God’s mercy and justice among the people in their communities? How does the Spirit of God cultivate imagination and capacity within congregations for this work?

In the Crossings matrix, I believe these questions are situated in the cross-over from Stage 6 to Stage 1, as congregational vocation leads to community-expressed love for God through love for neighbor. The offertory prayer is therefore more than a collection of individual prayers, just as congregations are more than a collection of individual believers. It is also a *congregational* prayer, in which these individuals are joined together as a community dedicating itself to a shared baptismal vocation of cross-bearing for and with the neighbor. As we know, each congregation has its own narrative, personality, and calling. Each congregation is called to unique, communally-discerned participation in the triune mission of God. This is lived out in its public life in the wider community in which God has situated it.

This essay explores what we might learn *from* congregations *as* congregations which are intentional about their public vocation of neighborly neighborhood love. In the first section of this essay, I will share some of the results of my own research into five newly-developed congregations who are actively developing public companionship with God in the civil society settings of their local communities. What does it take to do this work? In the second section, I would like to suggest how the distinction between law and promise serves as an interpretive framework for understanding congregations and their mission “outside the box.”

## **Section 1: Congregations as Public Companions with God in Civil Society**

One of the all-time classic movie scenes about landing in the middle of something quite different and embarking on an adventure into a new world is from *The Wizard of Oz*. Dorothy steps out of the farmhouse after it touches down at the edge of Oz. Clutching her little dog, she

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says, “Toto, I have a feeling we’re not in Kansas anymore.” Just like the yellow brick road beckoning her into a marvelous new adventure, this new journey for the church, this *new era of mission*, as it has been called, propels us forward with new imagination. The congregation lives into that future by careful discernment regarding two important questions, “*What is God doing?*” and “*What is God calling us to be and to do?*” The 21<sup>st</sup> century church of North America recognizes it is not located in Christendom, the cultural milieu in which the church enjoyed an accepted position of influence and authority, but on a mission field. With Dorothy we observe, “We’re not in Kansas anymore.” Only, “We’re not in Christendom anymore.”

There is a marvelous adventure ahead as the church re-discovers its apostolic identity centered on the mission of the Triune God. In varying ways, Christian congregations in the U.S. are discovering this mission field as they encounter folks who don't know the gospel of Jesus Christ living right across the street. New things are happening in these congregations as they move into this era of mission, including new hospitality to the stranger, changing expressions of the vocations of clergy and lay leaders, and re-envisioning of the nature and call of congregations themselves.<sup>3</sup> God is inviting the church into a “new missional era . . . to join in this new adventure in the life of God and world, gospel, church, and culture.”<sup>4</sup>

Gladys was the elderly, long-time treasurer of a small rural congregation. Like so many others, this congregation lamented the changes and challenges that were disrupting “business as usual.” At one church council meeting, they were addressing what to do about falling attendance. One problem was the young people: they weren’t showing up for worship. One person observed, “You know why they’re not here on Sunday mornings? It’s because they’re at the bars on Saturday nights!” To which Gladys replied, “Well, then, you know what we need to do?” She paused as everyone leaned forward expectantly, eager to hear their revered matriarch chime in

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<sup>3</sup> See Patrick R. Keifert, *Welcoming the Stranger : A Public Theology of Worship and Evangelism* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), Craig Van Gelder, *The Essence of the Church: A Community Created by the Spirit* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2000).

<sup>4</sup> Patrick R. Keifert, *We Are Here Now: A New Missional Era: A Missional Journey of Spiritual Discovery* (Eagle, ID: Allelon Publishing, 2006), 36-37.

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with her own lament. Then she challenged, “We need to get our little behinds down to the bars!” It was clear to Gladys that the church needed to be on a mission to these young people.

The widespread use of the term *missio Dei*, referring to the mission of the Triune God in the world for the sake of the world, set the stage for understanding the missional church.<sup>5</sup> Upon that stage and more congruent with the Reformers’ distinction between law and promise, the twofold mission of the *missio duplex Dei* orients our Lutheran Trinitarian understanding of the emerging missional church. Asking, “What is God doing?” leads us also to the next question, “What is God calling us to be and to do?” These two basic questions, however, do not invite us to throw random answers at the wall—or into the sky.

Asking, “*What is God doing?*” and “*What is God calling us to be and to do?*” is not without theological grounding. We know something of what God is up to on the basis of Scripture and tradition, both received and lived. The law/promise tradition of the Reformation provides us a hermeneutic, a matrix, for discerning God’s activity in the world on the basis of what God has done in Jesus’ death and resurrection, by the power of the Spirit, for the sake of the world. Gary Simpson has written an essay which mines the riches of the Lutheran tradition for mission, provocatively titled, “A Reformation is a Terrible Thing to Waste.” In it he reminds us that, amid the consumptive culture and market economies which too often shape our lives, we have been given a “promising theology” as the necessary alternative for an emerging missional church: “Only the promise *in* Christ, freshly rooted in the distinction between law and promise, firmly fastens and forever frees the missionary promise *of* Christ for the world.”<sup>6</sup>

Although this might be a “new era,” this is not an altogether new frontier for Lutherans. Liturgically, as evident in the offertory prayer cited above, Lutherans have prayed that their gifts might work for “the care and redemption” of God’s world.<sup>7</sup> Theologically, it has long been

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<sup>5</sup> David Jacobus Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991), 389-93.

<sup>6</sup> Gary Simpson, “A Reformation is a Terrible Thing to Waste: A Promising Theology for an Emerging Missional Church” in *Missional Church in Context: Helping Congregations Develop Contextual Ministry*, ed. Craig Van Gelder (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007), 67.

<sup>7</sup> *LBW*, 69.

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understood that within God's left-hand kingdom of mercy and justice, acts of mercy (like providing food and shelter, caring for the elderly, etc.) and acts of justice (like working for equitable distribution of food and wages, peacemaking, etc.) are activities through which Christians actively participate specifically in God's care of the creation.<sup>8</sup> Practically, Lutherans have been publicly expressing the compassion of Christ in U.S. communities for decades through health and human services organizations.<sup>9</sup>

These commitments have not taken root in congregational life as a public vocation of congregations within their communities. Gerhard Forde clearly makes the case it should be so:

This church was not, according to the Reformers, an arrangement optional to believers in the sense that they could form a club or not according to their whims. That is why they said that the church *as institution* was ordained by God. . . . The institutional church is for the *public* proclamation of the message. It is to be *for* the world. God ordains that there be an institution for getting at the world.<sup>10</sup>

This "getting at the world" moves congregations from the comforts of privatized religion into the public sphere where they undertake the moral vocation to "bring God's ongoing creative agency to bear on the life of our neighbors and our neighborhoods."<sup>11</sup> As Martin Marty reminds us, congregations are places where the private and the public meet,<sup>12</sup> dispelling the notion that the public vocation of the congregation happens at the expense of connections to private, individual lives. Again, to Forde:

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<sup>8</sup> *Psalm 101*, in *LW* 13:146. For Martin Luther's understanding of God's left-hand kingdom of mercy and justice, see his commentary on Ps. 101.

<sup>9</sup> Over 300 Lutheran health and human services now comprise Lutheran Services in America (LSA), the largest nonprofit in the U.S. by a significant margin. See [www.lutheranservices.org](http://www.lutheranservices.org).

<sup>10</sup> Gerhard O. Forde, *Where God Meets Man: Luther's Down-to-Earth Approach to the Gospel* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing House, 1972), 127.

<sup>11</sup> Gary M. Simpson, "Toward a Lutheran 'Delight in the Law of the Lord': Church and State in the Context of Civil Society," in *Church and State: Lutheran Perspectives*, ed. John R. Stumme and Robert W. Tuttle (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2003), 48.

<sup>12</sup> See Martin E. Marty, "Public and Private: Congregation as Meeting Place," in *American Congregations*, vol. 2, *New Perspective in the Study of Congregations*, ed. James P. Wind and James W. Lewis (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1994) 133-166.

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The church as institution is entrusted with the task of seeing to it that public life too is truly down to earth. To be a Christian is to live under the sign of him who “came from heaven down to earth,” to live under the sign of his cross and resurrection, and thus to wait hopefully, patiently, on this earth by making it a better place and to challenge the world, through one’s vocation *and* the church to do the same.<sup>13</sup>

In this new era of mission and in the cross-over from Stage 6 to Stage 1, the church moves forward as a sailboat in uncharted waters as the Triune God innovates missional church.<sup>14</sup> There is no *best* way to navigate these waters, but there are a myriad of courses and possibilities abound. The research that follows boards five newly-developed congregations that have set sail on this journey with an eye toward the communities in which God is planting them. They are exploring how to connect to those communities, and from their efforts and experiences have demonstrated some emerging understandings about missional congregations as public companions with God in civil society that are applicable to the development of new or the re-development of existing congregations. They provide a map into this promising and challenging congregational journey from Stage 6 to Stage 1, as congregations participate in God’s left-hand kingdom care of the world in their surrounding communities.

The five congregations I studied were very diverse with regard to geographical region, community classification, ethnicity, gender of the pastoral leader, age, size, and even building type in which they worshiped. The inquiry method I used was grounded theory qualitative research, which employs the varied approaches of ethnography, intensive interviews, and textual analysis to discover the components of capacity that are vital to the empowerment of these congregations for public companionship with God in civil society.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Forde, 128.

<sup>14</sup> Keifert, *We Are Here Now: A New Missional Era: A Missional Journey of Spiritual Discovery*, 50-51.

<sup>15</sup> The following four Aristotelian categories are the components of capacity created by Church Innovations for their Congregational Discovery consulting process: knowledge base, skills, attitudes and beliefs, and transferable habits. See <http://www.churchinnovations.org/>. For an instructive example of how these components of capacity are utilized in congregational studies by Church Innovations, see Pat Taylor Ellison, "Doing Faith-Based Conversation," in *Testing the Spirit: Theological Reflection for Mission in Congregational Studies, 2004*, ed. Patrick Keifert (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005, forthcoming). These components of capacity have been edited as follows to focus on community participation in this particular study of congregational public companionship with God in civil society: knowledge, skills, attitudes and beliefs, and associative habits.

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Through careful coding of the data generated from the research visit in each congregation, a unique set of components of capacity emerged within each congregation. These revealed important things about how God is shaping each of them for public companionship in civil society. Gary Simpson has identified four distinguishing marks of congregations that are communicatively prophetic public companions in civil society: 1) the conviction that they are participating in God's creative work; 2) compassionate commitment to other institutions and their moral predicaments; 3) critical and self-critical communicative procedures and practices; and 4) creative strengthening of moral fabrics for a life-giving and life-accountable society.<sup>16</sup> The picture of each congregation was sharpened and focused for mission by analyzing their components of capacity in relationship to these four distinguishing marks. This process deepened our discernment and understanding of each congregation's vocation to participate as public companion with God in civil society.

When the components of capacity in all the congregations were compared with each other, a set of components of capacity were discovered to be held in common among the congregations. These help us begin to answer the question, "When reaching out to our communities, *what does it take?*"<sup>17</sup> Through these areas of capacity, God may also lead other congregations into their unique vocations "to mend and make whole"<sup>18</sup> among their neighbors and in their neighborhoods.

Congregations are, of course, not alone in caring about the world around them. Civil society organizations are often on the forefront of caring within communities. Civil society is defined by Gary Simpson as that "vast, spontaneously emergent, ever dynamic plurality of

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<sup>16</sup> Simpson, *Critical Social Theory: Prophetic Reason, Civil Society, and Christian Imagination*, 144-45.

<sup>17</sup> These five congregations had the following components of capacity: 1) their *knowledge* of the community poor and of local politics is basic to their community engagement; 2) they have developed *skills* for helping in the community, innovating new solutions to problems, and adapting readily to changing circumstances while maintaining shared congregational priorities; 3) they share an *attitude* for thinking outside the box and the *belief* that the church exists to care for others, including those outside the congregation; and 4) they demonstrate *associative habits* of partnering with other organizations, practicing neighborliness, and functioning as a community church.

<sup>18</sup> Gary Simpson et al., *Living Out Our Callings in the Community* (St. Paul, MN: Centered Life, 2006), 17.

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networks, associations, institutions, and movements for the prevention and promotion of this, that, and the other thing.”<sup>19</sup> It is the institutionalized aspect of the personal lifeworlds of culture, society, and personality which involve cultural reproduction, social integration, and socialization, respectively.<sup>20</sup>

In our Western society, the political and economic power structures tend to squash these personal lifeworlds and, according to Jürgen Habermas, it is the separation of church and state that has necessitated the development of civil society as:

a network of voluntary associations and a political culture that are sufficiently detached from class structures. . . . Civil society is expected to absorb and neutralize the unequal distribution of social positions and the power differentials resulting from them . . .<sup>21</sup>

Through civil society institutions, dominating forces of power and money are addressed on behalf of these lifeworlds and the pain and suffering within them. These activities may take many forms, but Gary Simpson has provocatively summarized them as “sleuthing” (like a bloodhound) and “sluicing” (like an engineer building irrigation canals).<sup>22</sup> It is partnership with these institutions in sleuthing and sluicing that deepens congregational engagement in civil society.

An arrow indicates our move from Stage 6 to Stage 1. We are new creations freed in Christ, and we live in the world by the power of the Holy Spirit, bearing Christ amid the assaults of the devil and the world by bearing love to our neighbors and neighborhoods. Placing the churchly vocation of congregational public companionship within the context of other civil society organizations provides a broader perspective within which congregations might more fully and creatively explore the possibilities and potential in this vocation. Here we are assisted through research conducted by the Center for Civil Society Studies (CCSS) of Johns Hopkins

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>20</sup> Gary M. Simpson, *Critical Social Theory: Prophetic Reason, Civil Society, and Christian Imagination* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2002), 108.

<sup>21</sup> Jürgen Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996), 175.

<sup>22</sup> Simpson, *Living Out Our Callings*, 16-18.

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University Institute for Policy Studies. As a result of comparative studies among civil society organizations in over fifty countries, the CCSS has proposed five hypothesized contributions which civil society organizations might make in their communities: 1) service, 2) innovation, 3) advocacy, 4) values guardianship, and 5) community-building.<sup>23</sup>

In my research, the CCSS hypothesized contributions were used to further analyze the components of capacity exhibited by the congregations, and they demonstrated differing ranges of possibility along that spectrum of opportunities. These potential contributions, seen within the framework of civil society organizations in general, not only provide congregations with visions of new possibilities for direct community involvement but also new possibilities for partnering with other civil society organizations. Participation in God's Trinitarian care of the world is rich and full of potential. The arrow from Stage 6 to Stage 1 is neither singular nor focused in just one direction, but bursts like fireworks into multiple avenues of expression for congregations within their communities. We are embarking upon many yellow brick roads as public companions with God in civil society!

## **Section 2: Law/Promise Congregational Understanding**

In this second section, I would like to suggest how the distinction between law and promise serves as an interpretive framework for understanding congregations as they pursue their mission "outside the box." *The law/promise framework helps us participate in God's renewal of the church today for mission.* Too many congregational leaders look for keys, fill out diagnostic surveys, seek purpose-driven advice, and generally run after the gods of secular wisdom in search of congregational renewal. Congregational renewal is God's business—it is the dedicated

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<sup>23</sup> Lester M Salamon, Leslie C. Hems, and Kathryn Chinnock, "The Nonprofit Sector: For What and for Whom?," in *Working Papers of the Johns Hopkins Comparative Nonprofit Sector Project* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins Center for Civil Society Studies, 2000).

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task of the *missio duplex Dei*.<sup>24</sup> The law/promise conversation re-orientes our shared life within the life of the Trinity.

I've been focusing on one small section of the law/promise matrix: that move from being rescued in Christ, to living life for the neighbor. My daughter, who was miraculously spared her life in a horrific car accident, now believes more profoundly than ever in God's miraculous grace—and lives with a humble, determined enthusiasm for sharing that good news with others. Being rescued can do that to us; it re-orders priorities, heightens commitments, and motivates. As one of my students wrote:

This is the way in which law and gospel most harmoniously work together. In the place where God has provided for and freed the Christian through his promise of redemption, the Christian is called immediately back to serve his neighbor, that his neighbor might also experience God's goodness in creation.

Or, as another student said so succinctly, "If we are renewed and by our renewal renew our neighbor, is that not the kingdom of heaven?"

In this second section, I invite us to reflect on some of the ways this law/promise matrix addresses our callings and our challenges in congregational life – and why the distinction matters now as much as ever. I will quickly mention five that occur to me, for starters.

First, the law and promise distinction reminds us that congregations, like individuals, need to be *renewed daily* in the covenants which God has made with them. As each day we arise to our congregational life, we need to corporately claim that baptismal promise that, as Simpson says, "firmly fastens and forever frees" us as the church as well as individuals. To do so requires that our congregations find corporate ways to engage in that continual movement within the law/promise matrix. In a recent visit to Luther Seminary, ELCA Bishop Mark Hanson noted the need for *corporate* confession by the church as he recalled placing his hands upon the wall between Israel and Palestine in a liturgical act of repentance on behalf of all of us. Similarly, we

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<sup>24</sup> Simpson, "A Reformation Is a Terrible Thing to Waste: A Promising Theology for an Emerging Missional Church," 68-70.

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might ask what corporate acts of baptismal repentance might be appropriately enacted within our local communities.

Second, it gives us *purpose*. We have been given our purpose in our baptisms. Lack of purpose and general dissatisfaction in congregations are not the *symptoms* of our problem but are at the core of our problem itself. We need not diagnose *them*, but they are the law diagnosing *us* and our need for the redemption and transformation, forgiveness and renewal through Christ's death and resurrection by the power of the Spirit. I believe the arrow that propels us from Stage 6 to Stage 1 provides exactly the purpose our congregations need: it's our neighbor's need. Our purpose is for Christ to be central in our congregations – to be received, claimed, and lived in the community Christ died to save – and then borne to the neighbor and shared with the neighbor. Surely this is one place where we have tended to “hoard Christ,” as Simpson would say, and become enclosed upon ourselves in congregational busy-ness. It is our enclosed centrality that keeps us from taking up the cross of our neighbors, particularly those at the margins and in deepest need. Like the elder brother in the parable of the lost son, the “regular members” in our congregations can claim every bit of time pastors and other congregational leaders are able to give – and always more. It then becomes difficult to be the congregations Patrick Keifert suggests we should be, whose eschatological imagination is for those who are not yet there—or have not yet returned.<sup>25</sup> Moving within the diagnosis and prognosis of the law and the promise forever directs us to our neighbor, both as individuals and as congregations.

Third, I believe that God working through the law/promise distinction *frees* our congregations. God frees us from congregational lethargy or that vague disinterest that makes travelling soccer or relaxation at Starbuck's more inviting than worship on a Sunday morning. Remember Luther's famous words from “The Freedom of a Christian,” “A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all.”<sup>26</sup> We can do nothing to earn our salvation—so we've got 100% of our time on our hands,

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<sup>25</sup> See Patrick Keifert, “The Trinity and Congregational Planning: Between Historical Minimum and Eschatological Maximum,” *Word & World* 15, no. 3 (1998), 282-290.

<sup>26</sup> LW 31:344.

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and that time has a name on it: our neighbor. The law/promise distinction ties our work daily to our own need for the Savior, to justification by faith alone, so that we can truly be freed for the neighbor.

Fourth, the law/promise *mobilizes and energizes* us. This is where we Lutherans tie ourselves in knots. Should we be nervous about being energetic in our freedom? To use St. Paul's words, "μη γενοιτο"—by no means! That would be living under the law so that grace could abound! Some of the congregations in my research were beehives of activity, so I was asked if they were just a bunch of practical atheists—you know, "praying as if it all depended upon God, and working as if it all depended upon themselves." I believe they were not. One of them is in one of the most dangerous cities in the United States, but they take on the drug dealers and the crime and the poverty because they've found new life and deep joy in Christ, and can't help but share it.

*Walking around the neighborhood distributing flyers with the pastor developer of Banquet of Praise, a young teen went right up to a drug dealer on the streets and said, "I'm walking with my pastor. Would you like to come to church? We're having a service next Saturday."*

*The man said, "You wouldn't want me to come to your church."*

*The youth replied, "Why not? You're a child of God. That's what my pastor says. Here's a pamphlet."*

*The man looked the pastor straight in the eye, "Are you sure you'd want me to come to church?"*

*She replied, "Yes. Jesus loves you." And the man began to cry.*

Given the daunting challenges of life in this community, this new congregation could easily become a gathering of such "practical atheists," themselves carrying the weight and burden of the pain they feel called to address. But they see it as a necessary part of their faith in Christ, who carries *them* as well as those they reach. As one person said, "The faith element tells us that we can persevere not because the power is ours but by the power of the Holy Spirit in us we are able to keep on moving. Not that we will ever make heaven on earth, but we can make it a whole lot better than it is." They do what they do because, in that impoverished, crime-riddled community, you can't *preach* the gospel without *being* the gospel for the neighbor. As another person said, "In this community, everyone is so poor that it would be absolutely ludicrous to try and have a church that wasn't trying to reach out into the community. There's no way to do it."

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And, in faith, they count it all joy. They *want* to be down at City Hall, lobbying at the state capital for zoning changes, staying up late to make sure the corner convenience store is safe, and canvassing the neighborhood to invite drug dealers to church. They have received joy in Christ, in spite of their circumstances. This is abundant life for congregations.

Fifth, the law/promise matrix necessitates that we *understand* our communities so that we might discern both the assaults of the devil and the world, and God's saving action as well. It provides for faithful use of the wealth of insight available to us through sociological and demographic tools. As one student said, "To make the gospel message heard in our context, we must first of all acknowledge our context using demographical and sociological tools." We need leaders that can "read the audiences" and understand our culture, but more than that, we need leaders that can think theologically about this world around them. Teaching students to view the sociological data through the law/promise lens is already making a difference as students go out in groups to study congregations. One student made my day when she wrote and now, as I read it, it reminds me of the title of this conference: "getting honest . . ."

For the congregations who discern to move into the future, the use of sociological and demographic tools put in a framework of Law-Promise is a helpful, healthy, and hopeful method to work with. What became clear was the paramount difference between the pure work of a sociologist or demographer and that of a theologian who used the tools of sociologists and demographers. It brings the congregation to recognize their need for death, for they have failed. Done with the utmost care and nurture, sociological studies can allow the congregation to be honest with itself. The promise of Christ claims the dead congregation and the Holy Spirit raises it to new life and new identity in Christ.

There's much more to be mined in the riches of law/promise on God's mission field here in North America. Perhaps I've gotten our imaginations stirring. After finishing the project of researching congregations, one student summed up our task like this: "As a future leader within the ELCA, part of what I believe will be my job is to understand the dynamic relationship between law and promise and what that means for a given congregation."

I would like to conclude by commenting on the title to my talk, "Missional God Outside the Box." That phrase ("outside the box") was, in fact, the phrase commonly used by the research *congregations* in referring to themselves. Mission pushes congregations to go "outside"—beyond usual norms and perimeters which have become like boundaries difficult to

## **Missional God Outside the Box: Law/Promise and Congregational Vocation**

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cross. In the cross-over from Stage 6 to Stage 1, congregations just may find themselves outside usual patterns *and* outside their doors and into the streets, i.e., “outside the box.” But my title does not refer to congregations; it refers to God “outside the box.” We go because God is already there—our missional God is already “outside the box”—and by faith alone, may we participate with God there.

*The Church of Christ in every age,  
Beset by change, but Spirit-led,  
Must claim and test its heritage  
And keep on rising from the dead.*

*Across the world, across the street,  
The victims of injustice cry  
For shelter and for bread to eat,  
And never live before they die.*

*Then let the servant church arise,  
A caring church that longs to be  
A partner in Christ's sacrifice,  
And clothed in Christ's humanity.*

*We have no mission but to serve  
In full obedience to our Lord;  
To care for all, without reserve,  
And spread God's liberating Word.*