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Mission:Life

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It has become almost a truism to say that we are currently living in a time of crisis. The word "crisis" is now rather easily applied to a wide range of social, economic, political, educational, environmental, and technological phenomena that make up much of the context of contemporary life. This pervasive sense of crisis certainly has not left untouched the realm of Christian education.

During the last decade significant advances in the development of new media and methods in education and new insights into the whole educational process have been applied to the rapidly expanding and changing programs of denominational religious education. Most of the advances in both educational theory and practice have had a direct and beneficial effect on Christian education. The more or less passive receiving and parroting of teacher-transmitted content has given way to active inquiry, expression, and doing by the student. Mutual exploration and dialog by both student and teacher, concern for significant issues of life and openness to discovery, personal interest, and active involvement of the learner in the matter under study, and a greater variety of approaches to subject matter characterize today's educational theory and practice.

These trends as well as many others signal a better day for Christian education. With the accent on personal awareness and

interpersonal relations, with the stress on capturing the learner's interest, involvement, understanding, and participation, the purpose of Christian education is served better. The advantages of the newer ways of teaching have a direct and promising application to every area of the church's educational program.

Since The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod has historically been interested in the importance of education for the mission and life of the church, it was not surprising that at its New York convention the Synod urged its constituency to initiate a critical study of parish education programs and procedures with a view toward improvement. Hopefully there are few congregations today that have not made such a study and that have not given some thought to the way contemporary teaching-learning methods have affected the entire educational process.

Eight years ago Merton P. Strommen documented the impending religious knowledge crisis for Lutherans in *Profiles of Church Youth*.¹ In the ensuing years that crisis has not diminished. Two years ago in response to the increasing signs of educational lassitude and weakness the Denver convention of the Missouri Synod resolved "that Christian education, understood as the communication of God's edifying Word, is essential to the life of the

¹ St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1963.

church and is the primary process and fundamental activity of the church in mission and the basic means for church renewal."²

This crisis in Christian education is acknowledged across denominational lines. Almost every major church body in the United States has either recently completed or is soon to complete a thorough overhaul of its educational materials. An entire wall of shelves in the curriculum laboratory of the library at Concordia Seminary, Saint Louis, is crowded with the results of these new curriculum revisions. Late last year so distinguished a Christian educator as James D. Smart issued a distressing lament over the mounting ignorance of the contents of the Bible and its educational use in the church. In his own words this is "the crisis beneath all other crises that endangers the church's future."³

For several years the Missouri Synod's Board of Parish Education and the staff which it employs have been painfully aware of this crucial problem in the church. In response to the New York convention and to Resolution 7-01 of the Denver convention the staff of the Board of Parish Education dedicated itself untiringly to determine the scope of the crisis, the educational needs of the Synod, and the kinds of materials that should be produced in order to make the resolutions of the conventions a reality in 1971. The task was a monumental one. It required a reshaping of curricular materials so that they could more adequately equip God's

people of all ages to be on mission for Him in His world. This effort resulted in the formation of the "Mission:Life" program of parish education. The program is specifically designed to meet today's needs and challenges. Through its new forms and methods the Mission:Life curriculum intends to help God's people express and carry forward the faith and mission of the church. The results are a refreshing attempt to equip and inspire present-day Christians for active participation in the church's life and mission.

While Mission:Life attempts to deal concretely and creatively with the distinct problems of the local parish's educational program and seeks to use educational models and materials that speak to today's needs, of central significance for Lutherans is the fidelity of Mission:Life to the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments. Mission:Life recognizes that the Scriptures are absolutely central to the life of the church. Mission:Life uses the Scriptures as both source and norm for the Christian truth, faith, witness, and life it seeks to nurture and guide.

Mission:Life employs the classic Reformation hermeneutic of Law-Gospel, the word of God's judgment and grace. It recognizes man's great dilemma of alienation from God and man's inability to restore his broken relationship with God. It uses the Law to serve the purpose of the Gospel of God's redeeming grace in Christ Jesus. Mission:Life recognizes the Gospel as God's own power for living and in every conceivable way directs both teacher and learner to make the redeeming cross of Christ central to the teaching-learning process. Mission:Life deliberately attempts

² Resolution 7-01 in the *Proceedings* of the 48th regular convention (1969), p. 132.

³ *The Strange Silence of the Bible in the Church: A Study in Hermeneutics* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1970), p. 10.

to avoid the pitfall of reducing the process to learning a bundle of Biblical facts to which teacher and pupil give assent. The Gospel is presented as God's own way of restoring sinners to life, God's life, and to mission, God's mission. The teachers manuals conscientiously try to help the teacher move beyond simply getting the student to know or accept or repeat the facts. The manuals try to help both teacher and learner to attach themselves to the life-stream of God and to use God's own resources, through the forgiveness of sins, for life. Such serious, in-depth study of the Scriptures and the Christian faith is the hallmark of the Mission:Life program. It aims for personal response and commitment. It challenges the Christian to be ready to give his personal answer to contemporary personal and social issues and to struggle to live out his life in mission to other Christians and to the world.

Week-by-week use of the materials already in production will demonstrate how Lutheran the materials are and how seriously the authors take their commitment to the Scriptures and the Symbolical Books of the Lutheran Church. One hopes that this basic orientation of Mission:Life will become evident to everyone who uses the materials in good faith.⁴

Any critical appraisal of Mission:Life ought to keep this fundamental theological thrust of the materials clearly in mind. Admittedly, there is room for improvement. Even the most careful preparation, adequate field testing, and editorial re-

⁴ The basic theological assumptions and concerns of the editors of Mission:Life are described in *Design for Mission:Life*, prepared for the Board of Parish Education, The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1970), pp. 30—33.

shaping could not guarantee perfection. There is room for refinement and reworking. The openness of the staff to suggestions for genuine improvement is gratifying.

This is the way it should be. Helpful criticism ought always to be welcome. To date some of the criticism has not been especially helpful. As Lutherans we have the obligation to distinguish carefully "between needless and unprofitable contentions (which, since they destroy rather than edify, should never be allowed to disturb the church) and necessary controversy (dissension concerning articles of the Creed or the chief parts of our Christian doctrine, when the contrary error must be refuted in order to preserve the truth)."⁵ The Missouri Synod's Commission on Theology and Church Relations suggests that a glance at the articles of the Formula of Concord and the way in which these matters were treated shows what the framers of the Formula had in mind when they spoke of "necessary controversy." All of these issues had a bearing on the Gospel itself.⁶

In the face of contemporary problems and differences of opinion the Board of Parish Education and its staff are not indifferent to departures from the truth of God's Word nor are they willing to condone them. Throughout the materials the focus of concern is on the life-giving word of law and promise, judgment and grace.

⁵ Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration, Rule and Norm, 15, in *The Book of Concord*, ed. Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), pp. 506—7.

⁶ "A Lutheran Stance Toward Contemporary Biblical Studies," Report of the Commission on Theology and Church Relations, The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (1967), p. 7.

Factual details are important only as means of gaining an understanding of God's truth.

From the vantage point of total commitment to the Gospel the members of the Synod can exercise the gift of distinguishing between the chief parts of Christian doctrine and differing opinions, and will then not make the latter the ground for divisions within the church. A patient, fraternal dialog carried on in the light of the Gospel can and will result in blessing for all concerned.

Mission:Life presents pastors and educational leaders with a unique opportunity to do something about parish educational programs at the critical teaching level. One of the most important features of Mission:Life is the education of teachers. Indeed, the overall success of Mission:Life will probably be measured in direct proportion to the ability of a teacher to meet successfully the demands of the new program.

There are thousands of fine teachers throughout the Synod, but not enough of them. There are too many who are halfhearted or frustrated. Probably some teachers will want to quit when Mission:Life is introduced. They will feel threatened by the more creative process that the material calls for. Many devoted teachers are set in their ways, unaware of how much more joyous and effective their teaching would be if they tried new devices.

The hundreds of Mission:Life workshops that have been conducted in the synodical districts have exposed some teachers to the educational theory and practice of the curriculum. Most of these

teachers have been extremely enthusiastic and have shown a keen interest in the new ways suggested for the teaching-learning process. Others, feeling threatened by the new, are critical and on the defensive. They do not accept the newer ways mainly because they do not realize how much the old have failed.

In spite of many guides and handbooks, teachers tend to reproduce in their classes the kind of teaching on which they were raised. This has been going on for a long time. The problem is to help the clergy and other teachers to realize that there are all sorts of other ways to teach and to prompt teachers to try out those other ways. This can probably best be effected by arranging for teachers to sit through several sessions with a teacher who uses the new approach with success. Recent graduates of our terminal teaching schools ought to be utilized as much as possible in such a program. Another step in the right direction is to plan a series of weekly meetings, at least initially, to help teachers make the change from traditional educational patterns to the less stereotypic patterns of Mission:Life. *Interaction* magazine is planning to carry an eight-unit study course entitled *To Learn the Word*. These units are intended for study by church school workers.

There are a number of books currently available that discuss in a general way the understandings, attitudes, and preparations necessary for a successful educational venture. The pastor or teacher who wants to prepare the local staff for positive participation in Mission:Life may want to place some or all of the books listed below in the church library. Teachers who thoughtfully peruse them will usually find the

kind of advice, encouragement, and help they need to experiment with more creative ways of teaching.

Now is the time to start reading and thinking and planning for this fall. The days ahead are full of excitement and promise! Why not begin now to pray about your church's task of nurturing the members of Christ's body? Why not begin now to prepare your teachers to move ahead courageously? Your enthusiasm will be catching!

St. Louis, Mo.

Readings on contemporary religious education theory:

Cully, Kendik Brubaker, ed. *Does the Church Know How to Teach?* New York: Macmillan, 1970. \$7.95.

Griffin, Dale, ed. *Well, What Is Teaching?* St. Louis: Concordia, 1970. \$1.25.

Griffin, Dale, ed. *New Ways to Learn.* Saint Louis: Concordia, 1970. \$1.25.

Jahsmann, Allan Hart. *Power Beyond Words.* St. Louis: Concordia, 1970. \$1.95.

Sloyan, Gerard. *Shaping the Christian Message.* Glen Rock, N. J.: Paulist Press, 1958. \$.95.

Specifically related to the Mission:Life program:

Administering the Mission:Life Program in Your Parish. St. Louis: Concordia, 1971. \$.65.

Design for Mission:Life. St. Louis: Concordia, 1970. \$.50.

Interaction. February 1971. \$.25.

A couple of futuristic thought provokers:
LeDu, Jean, and Marcel van Caster. *Experiential Catechetics.* Westminster, Md.: Newman Press, 1969. \$5.95.

McKenzie, Leon. *Process Catechetics.* Glen Rock, N. J.: Paulist Press, 1970. \$1.45.

Ryan, Mary Perkins, and Russell J. Neighbor. *There's More Than One Way to Teach Religion.* Glen Rock, N. J.: Paulist Press, 1970. \$4.95.