

President Paavola, Vice President Preuss, Delegates and Guests,

Thank you for the privilege of bringing greetings to this convention. The theme, "Our God Our Help in Ages Past, Our Hope for Years to Come," caused me to reflect on my own ministry and how ministry has changed since I graduated from the Seminary in 1973, The Good News is our God remains the same and our message remains the same. We proclaim Christ crucified and risen from the dead. But the challenge we all face is how we can best share this priceless message with the people in our changing culture..

I remember reading an article some years ago by our Center for U. S, Missions which addressed that challenge. The article talked about the concept of cultural distance and how this can help a congregation determine how far a people group is from meaningful engagement with the Gospel. People with zero cultural difference have some concept of Christianity, speak the same language, have similar interests, often are of the same nationality, and are from a class group similar to your own or that which dominates the congregation. That was true of the unreached people we were trying to reach in Ulm, AR in the 1973. It made sharing the Gospel relatively easy. Back then even people who had no church affiliation felt like they ought to be going to church.

That is not true in most communities today. Those who study demographic trends tell us that most communities are fragmented, diverse, and increasingly negative toward the Christian church. We need to remember this as we carry out our ministries or sometimes we may be trying to do ministry with a zero cultural difference approach, when the people around us don't see us that way. In fact, this is true over 60% of the U. S. population. If what you are doing is in

your ministry is working in your community celebrate it and give thanks and praise to God. It is of great kingdom importance.

But if it is not working I encourage you to trust God, seek His guidance, and be willing to try a different approach. How can you determine if your church or ministry may need to try a different approach in the face of the cultural differences you are facing? Here are a few thoughts or questions to consider. Is your congregation or ministry feeling increasing financial pressure to sustain current ministries? Is the average age of your congregation creeping upward? Some estimate it is high as 67 for some LCMS congregations. The average age for the U. S. is 38. Are the things you did in the past no longer bringing those same positive results? Are you or your lay leaders losing hope?

If you answered yes to some of those questions I know President Paavola and the district staff have developed tools to help you with the challenges of ministry in today's culture. If I were serving a congregation in this district I would be on the phone with them next week to find out how they could assist me. I encourage you to do the same. And whatever approach to the ministry you choose to use in your church or school I leave you with these words of the Apostle Paul, "Be strong in the Lord and in the strength of His might. Be always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your labor in the Lord is not in vain. And may the God of peace be with you all. " God bless you.