

## Have we absolved ourselves from mission?

By the Rev. Mark Allred



**Mark Allred, the Alaska Synod's director for evangelical mission, wears a stole made by Norma Trimble, a pastor from Open Circle Ministries in Portland, Ore. The stole is in the "Button Blanket" style of Southeast Alaska.**

**M**y name is Pastor Mark Allred, of Inupiat (Eskimo) descent and a GLBT Christian. I was recently ordained as a minister of word and sacrament in the ELCA. I took an alternate route to ordination through the Theological Education for Emerging Ministries program at Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary in Berkeley, Calif.

Lutheran missionaries came to my part of Alaska nearly a century ago bringing with them the good news of Jesus Christ. My late mother, Bernice, was born in Shishmaref before statehood. I myself was born in Nome and baptized in 1973 at Our Savior's Lutheran Church. I am so very thankful for missionaries like Helen Frost and the Rev. John Maakestad who brought us this faith that we now hold precious.

Most of the villages on the Seward Peninsula are Lutheran. This means

that almost everyone in the village is a baptized Lutheran. We don't have to be missional because everyone else is already a Lutheran.

Living in the "big" city with all kinds of people and all kinds of churches, you have to start to ask yourself: "What is it that I believe? What is a Lutheran? How do I convey these deeply held beliefs in a way that people will understand?"

I have noticed that several Lutheran churches in our area have the phrase "All are Welcome" on church signage. Are we using the word welcome on our signs as a means of absolving ourselves from the command of our Lord to go and make disciples?

Webster's online dictionary defines absolve in this way: To set free, or release, as from some obligation, debt, or responsibility, or from the consequences of guilt or such ties as it would be sin or guilt to violate; to pronounce free; as, to absolve a subject from his allegiance; to absolve an offender, which amounts to an acquittal and remission of his punishment.

While in seminary I often wondered how we can fulfill the Great Commission as found in Matthew 28. I was hopeful that my time in seminary would help me answer this question, but it seems like the question only got more complicated.

I now understand as confessional Lutherans that we shy away from decision-based theology. And in practical ways we as leaders of the church don't know what is and is not appropriate in our approach toward invitation during our worship services. After all, we don't want to

accidentally slip into wrong theology.

I recently served as an interim pastor at a local mission here in Anchorage and I seem to have been plagued with this very topic. How do we engage the young people that seem to be missing from our congregations? How can we be more missional? What do people hear when they visit our churches? Do they hear "welcome" or do they hear something else? Are we truly inviting as a congregation?

Some might think, "I don't have to invite people to church because they can read our sign. They know they are welcome. Besides, it's just too risky to invite someone. I don't want to be pushy. And what if they say no?"

But we must try. I found it very interesting to find that God uses the ordinary: I don't have to be someone else for God to use me as I step out in obedience to his command.

It is true that our job of inviting is a difficult one. Human nature and even how our society has changed can cause us to experience paralysis when it comes to mission. But if we do what we can, I truly believe that God steps in and helps us to accomplish a bit more.

My mentor always told me that the gospel is greater than our own inabilities. The gospel is greater and it must be proclaimed.

Christ deputized his apostles after his resurrection to go out and proclaim the good news and they did. Now if this great faith of ours is to continue into the future, then we must do our part, even if it is uncomfortable. I am hopeful and my faith is quickened as I think about the future of the ELCA. □