

NALC calls Pastor Mark Ryman as Communications Coordinator

Pastor Ryman will assist NALC and its congregations in communication

Pastor Mark Ryman of Asheboro, N.C., has been called as Communications Coordinator for the North American Lutheran Church. He will begin serving in the position on Jan. 1.

The Communications Coordinator will work with other NALC leaders to develop and implement communications and marketing strategies to support NALC goals and messages.

"We are looking forward to having Pastor Mark Ryman serve as Communications Coordinator for the NALC. He brings a strong combination of professional communications experience and pastoral ministry, which have been a blessing for his congregation, Mission District, and the North American Lutheran Seminary. Now he can be a blessing for all of the NALC," said Pastor Mark Chavez, NALC General Secretary.

"Pastor Mark Ryman has already established himself as a leader in the area of communication, utilizing all the available platforms for developing and sustaining relationships among those within the Church and among those who are searching for answers that only Jesus Christ can offer," said NALC Bishop John Bradosky.



Pastor Mark Ryman

"We are certain there are ways our entire staff could be communicating more consistently and more effectively, yet the questions of format, timing and methods require the expertise that Pastor Ryman brings. In addition to helping our staff become more effective in our communication, Pastor Ryman will also be able to assist our congregations in utilizing every means possible to strengthen their communication capacity," Bishop Bradosky said.

"We believe his presence on our staff will assist us in living out all four of our values: Christ Centered, Mission Driven, Traditionally Grounded and Congregationally Focused," the bishop added.

Pastor Ryman serves Saint John's Lutheran Church in Asheboro, N.C. He began his pastorate there in May of 2012. Previously he served the Lord at the One Way House (now called Fellowship Christian Church) in Springfield, Ohio, for almost eight years, St. Paul United Methodist Church in the same city for three years, Christ United Methodist Church in Lakeview, Ohio, for nearly six years, and Graham Friends Church in Graham, N.C., for 12 years.

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2016 NALC Pastors Conference

'The Lord, His Church and Ministry' - Feb. 2-4 in Orlando

"The Lord, His Church, and Ministry" is the theme of the 2016 NALC Pastors Conference Feb. 2-4 at the Crowne Plaza Orlando Universal in Orlando, Fla.

Featured speaker is Dr. David Yeago, Professor of Systematic Theology and Ethics at the North American Lutheran Seminary and Trinity School for Ministry in Ambridge, Pa. Dr. Yeago will present two lectures on the theme.



David Yeago



James Nestingen



Amy Schiffrin

Reflections on preaching the Lectionary Scripture readings for Lent and Easter will be offered by the Rev. Dr. Amy Schiffrin, president of the NALS and Associate Professor of Liturgy and Homiletics at Trinity School for Ministry, and the Rev. Dr. James Nestingen, professor emeritus of church history at Luther Seminary. They will also lead preaching workshops. Pastors are welcome to bring a sermon to preach for one of the workshops.

Workshops and individual appointments with NALC staff will be available.

All NALC pastors are encouraged to attend the annual pastors conference.

Registration is \$100 and includes breakfast and dinner on Wednesday and breakfast on Thursday. To register or for more information go to thenalc.org. A discounted hotel rate is available for reservations made by Jan. 1.

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Mark and his wife, Susan, were both born in Springfield, Ohio. They have been married for 38 years. Both are graduates of Ohio Wesleyan University with majors in English Literature. Susan retired from a 23-year career at Duke University, and is now the Business Manager for Sola Publishing Company. The Rymans have two married daughters, Cristin and Miriam, and two granddaughters.

Pastor Ryman received a Master of Arts in Theology from Houston Graduate School of Theology in 2004 and a Master of Divinity in Biblical Studies and Theology from Carolina Graduate

School of Divinity in 2011. He is now working on a Doctor of Ministry in Stewardship of the Word through Saint Paul Lutheran Seminary.

Pastor Ryman serves on the Board of Regents for the North American Lutheran Seminary, but he will need to resign that position upon becoming an NALC staff member.

He is also the Online Resource Editor for Sola Publishing Company.

You can read devotions and other blog postings from Pastor Ryman at markryman.com and his "Daily Lessons in the Lutheran Confessions" at solapublishing.com and on the NALCNetwork.

Bishop's Christmas Message

Dearest followers of Jesus in the North American Lutheran Church:

Grace mercy and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

As we prepare to celebrate the birth of Christ with the words, "Christ is born! Oh, come, let us adore Him," I offer you a brief reflection on a subject that has preoccupied my thinking during the entire Advent season.

This persistent thought began with a devotional meditation based on Luke 2:9: "An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them and they were terrified." Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote the following words of reflection based on that text.

We have become so accustomed to the idea of divine love and of God's coming at Christmas that we no longer feel the shiver of fear that God's coming should arouse in us. We are indifferent to the message, taking only the pleasant and agreeable out of it and forgetting the serious aspect, that the God of the world draws near to the people of our little earth and lays claim to us. The coming of God is truly not only glad tidings, but first of all frightening news for every one who has a conscience.

His words indicted my conscience and caused me to pause and question my own spiritual life and conviction. **"We are indifferent to the message..."**

When I was asked to write an article about the greatest threat to the Church today, Bonhoeffer's thought shaped my response. The Church seems to be under assault from within and without. The lack of Biblical and Confessional preaching and teaching, combined with a lack of interdependent mutually-accountable relationships and institutional preservation, has undermined our capacity for genuine outreach, evangelism and mission. Many within the community of faith are content to attend occasionally and to give sparingly.



The Annunciation to the Shepherds by Abraham Hondius (1631-1691), Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam. (From Wikimedia Commons)

In addition, our world promotes relativistic truth, and decides moral issues based on popularity and tolerance rather than Biblical mandates and transcendent truth. Freedom of religion is being relegated to freedom to worship. Traditional concepts of marriage and family are being redefined. Throughout the world Christians are being persecuted, displaced and murdered by the terrorist acts of ISIS.

Yet not one of those factors — or all of them together — are a greater threat than the one that Bonhoeffer suggests. The greatest threat to the Body of Christ is our indifference — our apathy!

It is so easy to blame others and retreat in fear but our own indifference or apathy is slowly eroding,

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weakening and undermining the faith of individual believers, as well as the capacity of congregations for vibrant ministry and faithful mission.

Apathy or indifference is manifest in several important ways: the loss of zeal, the loss of interest in the spiritual realm, the increasing secularization of both the individual Christian and the local congregation, and a hardness of heart, a state where our excuses replace faithful responses.

The Scripture has a harsh word about indifference and apathy. *“So, because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of my mouth”* (Revelation 3:16). These words of warning are so severe because indifference is incompatible with love! It is impossible to love the Lord with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength and remain indifferent toward Christ. We cannot love others with the love of Christ and remain apathetic toward them. We cannot say we love Christ or others and remain unmoved and unchanged in our attitude and disposition.

Elie Wiesel is a Jewish Holocaust survivor and a Nobel Laureate. Some years ago I heard him speak and will never forget several quotes from his message. He said, *“The opposite of love is not hate; it’s indifference. The opposite of art is not ugliness; it’s indifference. The opposite of faith is not heresy; it’s indifference. And the opposite of life is not death; it’s indifference.”*

When asked about whether he believed an individual could really make any difference in the midst of overwhelming problems, Wiesel said, “There may be times when we are powerless to prevent injustice, but there must never be a time when we fail to protest. The Talmud tells us that by saving a single human being, a person can save the world.”

Every act of love, every expression of encouragement, every word that proclaims the Gospel of Jesus Christ makes a difference. Every disciple of Jesus possesses power in and through Christ, the capacity to make such a difference. The Christian life has always been more than the struggle to survive. It is investing our life in Christ in the lives of others. Living and loving with the certainty that the only life worth living is a life of sacrifice and service for the sake of the ministry and mission of Christ.

We are not indifferent or apathetic about everything. We demonstrate our passion in concerts, in theaters, in football stadiums and basketball arenas, in celebrations with friends and co-workers. I believe the world is longing to experience passionate Christians who demonstrate a profound love for Jesus and for those to whom He has sent us with the Gospel. Love is always passionate toward the beloved. It is this passionate love that Christ has for us that is poured out on the cross for our redemption and salvation. What wondrous love is this! It is a love that compels us to love Christ and our neighbor as our self.

This wondrous love born in a cattle stall and laid in a manger is dispelling my indifference to my own apathy!

“What Wondrous Love is This,” while not a Christmas hymn, has brought me consolation and hope.

What wondrous love is this that caused the Lord of bliss to bear the dreadful curse for my soul...

When I was sinking down ... Christ laid aside His crown for my soul.

To God and to the Lamb, Who is the Great I Am, while millions join the theme, I will sing...

And when in death I’m free, I’ll sing His Love for Me ... through all eternity...

We cannot simply strive to change our own attitude and disposition. We cannot overcome our apathy or indifference by simply willing it. This Wondrous Love — this One who gave His life for my redemption and salvation, who gives me life that is eternal — is the One who transforms my indifference to passionate love toward Him and all those He came to save.

May the celebration of His birth, the wonder of His love, and the presence of Immanuel — God with us — overcome every manifestation of our indifference and transform it into manifestations of our passionate love for Christ and our neighbor. In the name of the One who comes to save us from our sin,

Bishop John F. Bradosky

Advent Waiting

At Peace Lutheran Church recently, Intern Orrey McFarland shared during the children's sermon that Advent means simply, "coming." He explained that Advent is a season of preparing for the coming of Jesus. And that's certainly true, as Advent helps us focus on Jesus' coming at Bethlehem and His coming to us in the present in Word and Sacrament.

However, Advent also calls us to prepare for Jesus' coming in power and glory in the future, as we hear our Scripture readings in worship in early Advent. The fact that we are preparing for His coming at the end or culmination of earthly time means also that we are waiting! Maybe that's the most difficult aspect of Advent — waiting.

As I mentioned in my Advent devotional booklet (available on the NALC website), part of the orientation I offer to NALC congregational call committees is the realization that part of calling a new pastor is "waiting for the Lord" (Psalm 27:14). It is the awareness that we are not in control of the process, but are waiting and watching for the Lord to reveal His will, through interviews, conversations, visits, etc.

I know this is not what some of our call committees want to hear, as many would like to have their new pastor ready to step into the pulpit the Sunday after their previous pastor has left. But it doesn't work that way. In fact, it is most healthy for some time to pass between the former pastor and the newly called shepherd. Sometimes, in spite of all our work and effort, the process takes time — and more time than we might like. So that in the meantime, while we are always fulfilling our responsibilities, we are truly "waiting for the Lord."

It has been a blessing to see how many of our congregations without a pastor actually embrace "waiting for the Lord" as a spiritual practice. They share with me that they see waiting as a time for increased faithfulness, discipline, prayer and patience. Many pastors, as well, are focused on God's timing rather than their own — which can mean waiting.



Ministry Matters

Pastor David Wendel

Assistant to the Bishop
for Ministry and Ecumenism

Accepting and sometimes embracing waiting is counter-cultural, to say the least. Everything in our day and age is about quick response, a quick fix, instant gratification. If we send an email or post a message today on Facebook, we expect a reply ASAP. When folks don't respond quickly, we sometimes assume something's wrong or that we're being ignored. We have conditioned ourselves *not* to wait, as if waiting is a waste of our time.

Waiting can be a waste of time, of course, when we're speaking about human matters. No one wants to be kept waiting unduly for service in a restaurant, or a service call to our home. But waiting for the Lord is something different.

Waiting for the Lord provides the opportunity to grow more deeply in our trust in God and His will and activity. Waiting for the Lord allows us to focus our attention on God and His agenda, rather than our own. Waiting for the Lord helps us to cast all our hope upon God, relying upon Him rather than any human or worldly individual or power.

Our waiting is a time for prayer and preparation, whether we are waiting for an answer to prayer, healing, or guidance. The same is true for our Advent waiting.

Whether it's Sunday or midweek worship, personal Advent devotional time, or time around the home Advent wreath, we are waiting for the Lord's coming — for all the ways He comes to us. As we wait, we grow in patience and faith, praying, "Come, Lord Jesus!" May God bless our Advent season of watchful waiting!

Mission Impossible - Paul and Ananias

Following is the second of two sermons preached by Bishop John Bradosky at the 2015 NALC Mission Festival Nov. 5-7 at Upper Arlington Lutheran Church in Hilliard, Ohio. The sermons are based on Acts 9:1-22 and Acts 22:6-16 — the conversion of St. Paul. The first sermon was printed in the November NALC News.

Ananias, the Reluctant! The Scripture records the conversion of Paul three times. They are Paul's personal testimony regarding his experience being confronted and transformed by the living Lord. The difference is only in the details and seems to be a matter of adapting his testimony to the audience.

In the midst of a Jewish mob, Paul gave close attention to Ananias as one who is a devout Jew who became a follower, a disciple of Jesus. Ananias has a critical role.

Paul's conversion story is repeated three times and serves as a reminder from Luke of how important this experience is to the life of the New Testament Church and its witness to both the Jews and Gentiles regarding the power and persistence of Christ to proclaim the Gospel to the entire world.

On the Damascus road, Paul had seen the risen Jesus. Now he confessed Jesus as Lord. Paul wanted everyone to have the same experience — to see and know that Jesus is real. He is alive, and He is Lord of all! He is the light of the world that causes people to truly see!

The word "reluctant" came to mind as I thought about Ananias because it describes me and perhaps you as well. Many are reluctant when they hear the word "discipleship." If we are honest, we will admit that it causes us some amount of hesitation, if not dread! The very thought of sharing the Gospel of Jesus with anyone else causes us to doubt our capacity, our ability, and our worthiness. How many have felt that way or are feeling it now? Reluctant! Some have come to this event to confirm your aversion. Some are hoping they will find discipleship so difficult, so complex, something for others but not for me, something for other congregations but not ours.



From the Bishop

Bishop John Bradosky

Reluctant! I understand. I have had those feelings, and they still return from time to time.

Reluctant! You hesitate in the midst of your unwillingness to get involved. You wish the Lord would give someone else this responsibility or opportunity besides me!

The dictionary defines *reluctant* this way: "feeling or showing aversion, hesitation, or unwillingness to get involved; having or assuming a specified role unwillingly." Then one dictionary gives the following example: Reluctant is the feeling you have when you walk into the dentist's office for your appointment, knowing that it is the right thing to be there even though you are still focusing on the pain in your mouth that is soon to follow!

Welcome, my reluctant friends! You are in good company as we consider the witness of the reluctant Ananias and his impossible mission.

What do we know about the reluctant Ananias? His name *Ananias* is the Greek form of the Hebrew name *Hananiah*, which means "God has dealt graciously."

We are told three things about him.

First, he is simply called "*a certain disciple*." He was neither an apostle nor a great preacher; nor does he appear to have been a leader or an official or even an outstanding personality. We would never have heard anything about him had it not been for his figuring in Saul's conversion. Now his life has a place in the Scriptures eternally. How heartening to

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know that God knew all about him! No depth of obscurity can hide us from His gracious gaze. “The Lord knows the ways of the righteous.” It is not that Ananias was a shining star, but rather just an ordinary, humble disciple, who evidently sought to glorify Jesus by a consecrated life amid the unexciting usualness of a customary life in Damascus.

Second, we are told that he was “*a devout man according to the law*” (Acts 22:12). That is saying a good deal. He is a person of great integrity, principled in his beliefs, consistent in applying his faith to his life.

Third, Ananias had “*a good report of all the Jews that dwelt there*” (Acts 22:12). It is no small thing to have our character praised by those who strongly differ from us. It seems that he was thoroughly well known in Damascus, perhaps a native. Those with whom he lived, worked, and transacted business consistently thought well of him. His life was a proclamation of the faith. This faithful Jewish man had become a disciple of Jesus. Some suggest that he was an early convert to the Christian faith, perhaps at Pentecost in Jerusalem. Ananias was still learning and growing in his faith. These were not easy days for Christians to live out their faith in Christ. The persecution had already started. Saul was evidence of these difficult days.

Saul’s reputation preceded him. Ananias has heard about him. Great things are happening in the fledgling little church in Jerusalem and the surrounding area. Thousands are being saved, and God is blessing them with miracles and His power. That is the bright side! On the dark side: a man named Saul was wreaking havoc in the church. (Acts 8:1-3). He was traveling from place to place persecuting the early Christians. He was having them arrested and he even participated in their deaths. (Acts 7:58; 8:1). This was the subject of many conversations in Damascus and throughout the Church.

What Ananias did not know was that the risen Lord Jesus had already confronted Saul. He did not know that Saul was flat on his back — knocked off his “high horse,” so to speak. He did not know that Jesus had made him far less of a threat because he was struck blind by the light of Christ’s presence.

Ananias did not know Jesus was speaking to Saul about his next step. He did not know that Jesus commanded Saul to go into the city where He would give him instructions about what he must do. Ananias did not know that this mighty man with power and authority was now being led by the hands of others, completely dependent, unable to eat or drink for three days.

This is the context in which Jesus called out to Ananias in a vision. Notice, Ananias recognized the voice of his Lord. “Yes, Lord, here I am.” Jesus immediately gave him instructions. “Go to the house of Judas on Straight Street and ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul, for he has been praying.” This Lord has been listening to the prayers of Saul. Jesus has also responded to his prayers. He gave Saul a vision even as he was giving Ananias a vision. In this vision Saul has seen a man named Ananias come and place his hands on him to heal him, to restore his sight.

Ananias’ first reaction was to resist, to be a reluctant follower. I imagine he wants to make sure Jesus is aware of Paul’s past. “You want me to do something good for a man who is harming your holy people? You want me to lay my hands for healing on a man who wants to lay his hands on me to kill me?” He has the authority from the High Priests to do so. Chrysostom writes, “Fear had already taken hold of Ananias’s soul at the mention of Paul’s name. ‘Look,’ he says, ‘to whom you are betraying me. Indeed he came here for this very purpose, to arrest all who invoke your name. I fear he shall take me to Jerusalem. Why do you cast me into the mouth of the lion?’ He is terrified even as he speaks these words, so that we may learn from all sides the excellence of the man. For it is not surprising that these things were said by Jews, but that these men should be so terrified shows very great proof of the power of God. Both the fear is shown and the obedience that is greater after the fear.”

To his resistance Jesus says one word: “Go!” Then Jesus gives him his instructions. He was delivering Saul’s commission to become a disciple who would become an apostle, one that is sent. He was to be sent to the entire Gentile world to their kings and to the dispersed people of Israel. Then Jesus says something that really captured the attention of

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Ananias. It captured my attention as well. This one who was causing so much suffering was about to be shown by Jesus how much he must suffer for His name. Ananias had to trust that Christ was converting Saul and protecting him! This was about to become the story of the sheep subduing the wolf. Obedience trumps fear!

So Ananias goes to the house. He enters it and takes his cue from the vision Jesus shared with Ananias, the vision Jesus gave to Saul. He gets close to him. He lays his hands on him. He calls him, "Brother Saul!" His message is "that the same Jesus who appeared on the road — that same Jesus has sent me to heal your eyes so that you may see again. He sent me to insure that you are filled with the Holy Spirit." You know the story. The healing was immediate. Something like scales fell from Saul's eyes. He was baptized into Christ. Then he could take food and water and he regained his strength.

Imagine what Saul saw when his eyes were opened. He saw the very people he came to destroy caring for him for three days. From one he received healing for his vision. These same people gave him lodging, food and drink. Through them Saul received support, comfort and encouragement. They saved his life from those who were now trying to kill him. Then they disciplined Saul for three years. They invested in his life for the same amount of time the first disciples were in training with Jesus — three years!

Ananias played a critical role in the transformation of Saul's life. Various traditions say that Ananias later became one of the 70 disciples of Jerusalem, a bishop of Damascus, and a martyr. What is it that we can learn from Ananias and apply in our own lives following Jesus? Let me suggest seven important learnings:

1. Jesus uses ordinary people. Ananias was an ordinary, humble, obscure workingman who was faithful to Jesus. Our Lord takes great pleasure in giving those who are "faithful over a few things," even greater things to do.

2. Jesus uses humble people. Ananias was a humble man who did not intrude himself into his



NALC Bishop John Bradosky preaching at the opening celebration of the 2015 NALC Mission Festival.

message. The very opposite was the case. His only reference to himself was the only one that was needful, "The Lord, even Jesus ... has sent me." He did not start explaining who or what he was. He was content to be the faithful anonymous messenger of his master. He became distinctly aware that the message was not about him.

3. Jesus uses those who listen closely to His voice. Ananias recognized and listened closely to the voice of Jesus. How often through the Holy Spirit in reading and studying the Word or in our prayer life or in our daily experiences have we heard the voice of Jesus speaking and refused to respond? Ananias was a man who was listening for God's voice to show him the steps he was to take in his life. How difficult it is to hear Jesus' voice when we are immersed in doing our own thing, caught up in our own agendas and priorities. Ananias causes us to ask if we have a "listening relationship" with Jesus.

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4. Jesus is not put off by your reluctance. Saul was the most virulent and notorious oppressor of Christians in all of Judea. He came to Damascus for the same terrorist activities. Ananias wondered honestly, “Can a leopard change its spots?” Even though this was risky, Ananias did not turn away from Christ’s voice. To his objections, Jesus spoke one word: “Go!”

5. Jesus expects obedience. Jesus expects his disciples to obediently follow Him. Ananias went. He followed Jesus’ instructions explicitly. He made his way to Saul. He acts not on his own information, but Christ’s wisdom. God’s Word reminds us that “Obedience is better than sacrifice” (1 Samuel 15:22).

6. Jesus empowers those He calls with His Holy Spirit and His love. Ananias draws close, calls Saul a brother, heals his eyes, and baptizes him. In addition to the vision Saul received, he experienced the love of Jesus in the lives of those around him who guided him, stayed with him, fed him, laid hands on him to receive the Holy Spirit and nurtured him in Christian faith.

7. Jesus entrusts His mission to people like you and me. From Ananias we should learn that small acts of obedience that are premised on the Word of God, even when they seem contrary to reason, and even when they seem to challenge what seems so plain, can have great significance.

Please also notice that Saul’s conversion was a team experience. There were hosts of people involved. The Church takes on the responsibility of reaching out to others and nurturing them in the faith. We are never alone in Christ. We are never alone in His mission. Our perspective is so small, so limited. God’s perspective is wide, taking in all of history in a single glance. We need to rely on Him, on His Word, on His voice, trusting that He will not lead us astray and that through us He will accomplish more that we can imagine.

Even when God’s Word does not make sense, it is still true and can be trusted. Think for a moment of the countless lives influenced by Paul’s ministry over these centuries. It all began with the faithful, obedient response of a man called Ananias. If we

respond as Ananias did the mission that seems impossible becomes mission possible — and fulfilled!

Let me leave you with just a word from Ananias this day. From Acts 22:16 there is an important Greek idiom that implies that it was time for Paul to act on this commission from the Lord. The phrase is translated this way: “What are you waiting for?” As the Lord told Ananias to go, so Ananias told Paul to go. So I say to you, using his words, “what are you waiting for?”

In the name of Jesus, Amen.



Pastor Larry Lystig celebrates 50th Ordination Anniversary

Pastor Larry Lystig was honored on the 50th anniversary of his ordination by Word of God Lutheran Church in Peachtree City, Ga. He is pictured with his wife, Carolyn.

The Papal Visit to Washington, D.C.

By Pastor Dennis R. Di Mauro

When you think of Washington, D.C., you think of politics. Who is in the lead for the Republican nomination? Will Hillary be indicted for those classified emails? Can Paul Ryan be elected speaker of the House? Will the government be shut down this year? But what you usually don't think about is religion.

Now, Washingtonians *do* care about how religion might affect politics, but rarely religion in and of itself. But all this changed in September of this year, when the nation's capital came under the spell of "Francis Fever."

As a lifelong Washingtonian, I noticed strange things happening in L'Enfant's fair city. The first thing I observed was that the *Washington Post*, a paper which religiously avoids any substantive discussion of faith, suddenly started publishing papal articles on its front page *every day*. The city was shut down for two days with the government urging federal employees to take liberal leave or work from home. People everywhere were talking about Francis, asking me what I thought of him, and wondering how they might obtain a ticket to the papal mass on the campus of Catholic University.

Now in order to obtain a ticket in D.C., whether to attend a presidential inauguration or one of its formal balls or even to gain entrance to a papal mass, one has to "have access" or "know somebody." On Sept 23, a lack of needed connections left most of Francis' admirers standing on the street near the ellipse hoping to catch a glimpse of the "pope mobile."

But as a native, I knew not one, but in fact two people, who could procure me the coveted ticket.



Pastor Dennis DiMauro of Trinity Lutheran Church in Warrenton, Va. at the Papal Mass at the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington, D.C.

The first was myself. As an alumnus of Catholic University (Ph.D., Church History, 2012), I could enter a raffle for one of 500 tickets given to graduates. Obtaining only "waiting list" status after the initial drawing, my hopes faded, but a week later I received the confirmation email that I had indeed been awarded one standing room ticket.

The second ticket connection was my daughter, Zoey, who works as a reporter for the Archdiocese of Washington. Just a week before the mass, she procured three seated tickets, not far from the altar beside the National Basilica of the Immaculate Conception.

Dispatching the other tickets to two Franciscophile friends of ours, my wife, Coco, and I drove down to the campus and stood in an endless security line for over two and a half hours. Dressed in a neckband (rather than Roman) collar in hopes of not being identified as a Catholic priest, I was

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nonetheless asked by dozens of people to join the concelebrant section with the other priests, each time politely declining. Why hadn't I dressed in a coat and tie like Rick Warren?

But what came next was well worth the wait. Indeed, it is hard to describe the spectacle of viewing a sea of bishops processing up to the altar and seeing hundreds of priests taking their seats to celebrate mass along with the pope.

Then the pope mobile arrived, and an energetic Francis blessed the 25,000 cheering attendees as his transparent golf cart sped through the campus.

After a seemingly exhausted pope was shuffled from station to station through the basilica, the mass began with the canonization of Junipero Serra, the 18th-century Franciscan priest who founded the famous missions in California. The service was conducted in Spanish, with prayers in 10 other languages. I was grateful for my program and the English subtitles on a nearby Jumbotron.

The music was soaring, with five different choirs — including a specially-formed Archdiocesan Papal Mass Choir — performing such well-known hymns as “All Creatures of Our God and King” and “Holy God, We Praise Thy Name.”

The pope's sermon was simple and heartfelt, and he urged his fellow Christians to emulate the evangelism of Father Serra and live according to his motto, “*siempre adelante*” (always forward).

The experience was a thrilling example of faithful Christian worship that stressed the unity of believers all around the globe.

But as I left the mass I thought of the incredible allure that Francis has with so many people. During months of August and September, many of those people told me that they “love my pope.” Having to explain to them that I was a Lutheran pastor, I nevertheless asked them why they “loved the pope.” Half of them explained that they admired Francis's humility: his Fiat transportation, his humble apartment at the Vatican, and his jettisoning of those dreadful red papal shoes. The other half hoped for changes in the moral positions

of the Catholic Church on clerical celibacy, women's ordination, contraception, or gay marriage. The majority of those who “loved the pope” said that they were “not especially religious.”

With these reactions, it's hard to decide what to make of this new and beloved pope. Are his soundbites just for show? Is this merely a public relations campaign that is intended to reach people, while surreptitiously holding tightly to ancient Church doctrine? Or does he really intend to make substantive changes to the moral teaching of the Catholic Church and the curia in Rome? Only time will tell. But one thing is for certain, the “not especially religious” crowd is watching, and liking, what they see. Perhaps Francis, unlike the popes who preceded him, will give them a reason to explore their faith again and take a serious look at Jesus as Savior once more.

The Rev. Dr Dennis R. Di Mauro is the pastor of Trinity Lutheran Church (NALC) in Warrenton, Va. He also teaches for St. Paul Lutheran Seminary.

Mission Connect

The North American Lutheran Church is Mission Driven. The challenge that we face in this digital age is trying to communicate in "real" time.

Finding our footing in Psalm 107:2 — “Let the redeemed of the Lord tell their story” — Mission Connect was created as a tool that will help connect us as we are “Living on Mission, Telling our Stories.”

To receive a weekly text message update, text the word "mission" to 619-356-2910. If you prefer to receive the weekly update by email, please visit: <http://2hoots.com/users/login/60>.

Each week you can expect to receive a new story, prayer request, opportunity, or update from the NALC Mission Office. You may also text a prayer request to the same number listed above to be lifted up by the NALC Prayer Network. Join us as we journey together down this road of discipleship and mission!

Advent devotions by Pastor Wendel

Amen. Come, Lord Jesus, an Advent devotional booklet for 2015, is now available on the NALC website.

The devotions, prepared by Pastor David Wendel, Assistant to the Bishop for Ministry and Ecumenism, are new this Advent. They are based on Year 2 of the *Lutheran Book of Worship* daily lectionary.

The devotional booklet is free and may be copied for use in the home, by families, in congregations, Bible study groups, etc.

You may also sign up to receive the Advent devotional material as a daily text/email message. This option is available by texting *Advent* to 614-333-0334.

A Daily Intentional Response and Action Step adds an additional dimension to the devotions.

As we journey through Advent together, it can be challenging to integrate our daily devotions with everyday life. For those receiving the daily text/email messages, there is an option at the conclusion of each Advent reflection to help live into this time of Advent preparation. This tangible, small step is offered up only as a suggestion to assist in living into that particular day's meditation. Together with your meditation on the daily devotional text, pray for the person listed each day, and then intentionally take the time to write a note, send a text message or email, or post a message on Instagram or Facebook for that person.

If you choose to use social media, please use the hashtag #ComeLordJesus to help us track this initiative. Blessings on your Advent journey!

Those not participating in the daily text/email program may download and follow along with the Intentional Response and Action Step Guide available at thenalc.org.

Congregations consider ratification of amendments regarding change in NALC - Lutheran CORE relationship

NALC congregations are considering several amendments to the NALC constitution that were approved by the 2015 NALC Convocation. The proposed constitutional amendments are all related to a change in relationship between Lutheran CORE and the NALC.

The amendments will go into effect if a two-thirds majority of the NALC congregations voting by the Feb. 14 deadline approve the amendments.

The amendments remove references to Lutheran CORE in constitutional language about the Commission on Theology and Doctrine. The commission had been a joint commission for the NALC and Lutheran CORE.

The "Vision and Plan" for Lutheran CORE and the NALC, as announced in 2010, was for Lutheran CORE to continue as "an association of confessing Lutherans spanning denominational bodies" and for a close ongoing relationship between Lutheran CORE and the NALC.

Lutheran CORE leaders have decided it is now necessary for them to focus on providing "shelter" and "voice" for confessing Lutherans remaining in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. That focus requires an end to the formal relationship between Lutheran CORE and the NALC.

The details of the proposed amendments are available online at thenalc.org/2015-convocation.

Lutheran World Relief releases 2016 Early Warning Forecast

Lutheran World Relief, an international NGO working in 35 countries to develop sustainable solutions to poverty and food insecurity, released its 2016 Early Warning Forecast of regions it is monitoring for potential humanitarian crises over the coming year.

The regions highlighted in the report are those that LWR is actively monitoring and, in many cases, is already in-country working to help mitigate the worst effects of a potential crisis, develop disaster response plans and strengthen community resilience, especially in the most vulnerable rural areas.

LWR President & CEO Daniel V. Speckhard noted that the interconnected nature of today's globalized world means that humanitarian crises overseas will inevitably affect people in North America.

"Given these linkages and the rising vulnerability of global populations to both conflict and disaster, there is a vital need for an evolution in the way the international community thinks about humanitarian response that will have a lasting impact," he said. "We need to move beyond short-term mobilization for the latest disaster or applying the Band-Aid approach to an emergency in an isolated 'fragile' state."

"Instead, we need to approach recovery and resilience with a long-term time frame in mind, as well as a more holistic understanding of the importance of sustainable development. Breaking people out of the cycle of poverty will make them more resilient in the face of future disasters," he said.

The countries and regions on the 2016 Watch List include:

- + Syria, Afghanistan, Somalia.
- + Nepal.
- + Iraq.
- + Central America and the Caribbean.
- + Sahel Region of West Africa.
- + South Sudan.

In addition, there are several countries and regions where LWR sees signs of hope:

- + Colombia.
- + The Philippines.
- + Coffee and cocoa production in Haiti, East Africa, Central America and Indonesia.

Among the immediate challenges facing humanitarian community that are highlighted in the 2016 Early Warning Forecast:

+ The continuing refugee crisis, as the unprecedented migration we're seeing shows no sign of abating. The Syrian civil war and terrorism wrought by ISIS is not only pushing out millions of refugees, but is destabilizing northern Iraq. Refugee resettlement, complicated by security fears expressed by some communities and political figures, will be difficult.

+ What some are calling a "gorilla" El Niño is causing drought conditions in some places and will bring damaging rain and flooding in others. We must be prepared for disaster response. Food crises in Central America could spur migration.

+ The fuel blockade in Nepal has brought the post-earthquake rebuilding to a virtual halt. As winter approaches, isolated mountain communities will be cut off from supply deliveries, possibly auguring a second national crisis.

+ Drought and conflict have displaced more than 3.5 million people in the Sahel region of West Africa. Instability caused by the recent coup attempt in Burkina Faso, as well as terrorism-related incidents and threats in Mali and southeastern Niger will continue to be push factors for migration and make the lives of already impoverished people even more miserable.

LWR's 2016 Early Warning Forecast and more information about the work of LWR are available online at lwr.org.

Changing Our Congregational Culture

I came across a fascinating opinion column, in a recent issue of the *New York Times*, entitled “Academia’s Rejection of Diversity.” The article, written by Arthur C. Brooks, president of the American Enterprise Institute, reported on recent research about the level of ideological bias in academia.

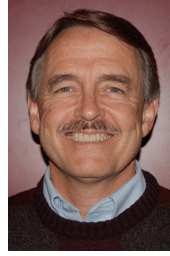
He wrote, “New research shows that academia has stopped short in both the understanding and practice of true diversity — the diversity of ideas. ... This year, a team of scholars from six universities studying ideological diversity in the behavioral sciences published a paper ... that details a shocking level of political groupthink in academia. The authors show that for every politically conservative social psychologist in academia there are about 14 liberal social psychologists.”

Mr. Brooks continues, “In one survey cited, 82 percent of social psychologists admitted they would be less likely to support hiring a conservative colleague than a liberal scholar with equivalent qualifications.”

One more quote: “One of the study’s authors, Philip E. Tetlock of the University of Pennsylvania, put it bluntly. Expecting trustworthy results on politically charged topics from an ‘ideologically incestuous community,’ he explained, is ‘downright delusional.’”

While Arthur Brooks’ column focused on *political* bias in academia, I believe that many mainline Protestant seminaries have, for decades, exhibited a similar type of *theological* bias. The “liberal” ideological bias in some of these seminaries has manifested itself in a kind of “higher biblical criticism” that, in effect, undermines the centrality of God’s Word for our life and faith as Christians. And that devaluation of Scripture, not surprisingly, has resulted in a theological worldview that questions the validity of personal and congregational evangelism.

Think about it: This has been a theological bias which has impacted thousands of seminary graduates over the last 40 years. And, in my opinion, this has been one of the greatest factors in



In Pursuit of the Great Commission

Pastor Don Brandt

undermining the mainline church’s commitment to the Great Commission.

You could argue that a “Lutheran evangelist” is an oxymoron — a contradiction in terms. That’s an exaggeration, of course. However, the evangelistic task can seem pretty intimidating for those of us who grew up Lutheran whether we are pastors or laity.

So, if you struggle with this, and you would welcome some guidance and support in the evangelistic task, I recommend a parachurch ministry currently being utilized by 30 NALC congregations across the country. I am referring to Navigator Church Ministries, a ministry which assists pastors and lay leaders in changing congregational culture through an emphasis on disciple-making. You have perhaps heard Bishop John Bradosky advocate for this ministry.

My own congregation has now “signed on” with NCM, and I highly recommend that you check it out. I can’t adequately describe this disciple-making ministry within the limits of this column. However, the NCM model is about congregational transformation from the inside out. It begins with a coaching relationship with the pastor, and then continues with an initial Leadership and Learning Team (LLT) that meets for about three months. Then the individual team members are each encouraged to meet with two or three additional people to share what was learned in the LLT group.

By the way, one very important and foundational part of this NCM process is to help all participants

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Letter of Counsel on Marriage and Religious Freedom

The NALC's Commission on Theology and Doctrine has approved a Letter of Counsel, written by Dr. Robert Benne, relating to marriage and religious freedom in light of the U.S. Supreme Court's 2015 decision regarding marriage between two people of the same sex. The text of this Letter of Counsel may be found on the NALC website under the Resources/Educational Resources/NALC Statements and Letters tab.

Online directory of pastors

An online directory of NALC pastors is being prepared. In preparation for this directory, pastors were sent a letter detailing their contact information as it will be listed.

Pastors are asked to return the letter indicating any information they would not like included in the online directory or any corrections to their information. The letter should be returned even if the information is correct, so that we know it was received and reviewed.

NALC pastor wanted to preach in Wittenberg

The chance of a lifetime for preachers — to preach in the churches where Martin Luther preached.

Wittenberg English Ministry is looking for an NALC pastor who would be willing to serve as the English-speaking minister in Wittenberg Sept. 6-20, 2016. Interested pastors are encouraged to contact Pastor Robert Flohrs at 540-656-7517 or robert.flohrs@gmail.com.

NALC clergy cards coming soon

NALC clergy identification cards for 2016-2017 will be mailed before Christmas. If you do not receive your card by January, please contact the NALC Administrative Office at nalc.mnoffice@thenalc.org or 888-551-7254.

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establish a daily devotional discipline. The ultimate goal, however, is to bring about a transformation of your congregational culture so that, through disciple-making, your members become more intentional about evangelistic outreach.

If you want more information you may go to the Navigator Church Ministries website — navigatorchurchministries.org. Or, if you would like to contact directly the NCM point person who has been working with the NALC, email Dennis Blevins at dennis4pdx@comast.net.

Pastor Don Brandt serves Our Savior's Lutheran Church in Salem, Ore. You may contact him at donb@oursaviorssalem.org.



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