

NALC News

North American Lutheran Church

January 2016

Daily devotions now available on NALC website

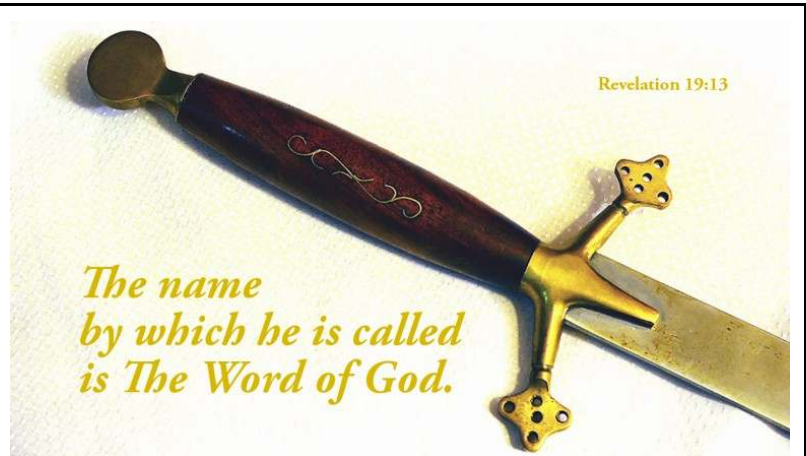
Daily devotions are being featured on the NALC website. The daily devotions are also posted in the North American Lutheran Church group on Facebook and on the NALC Network.

Written by NALC pastors and coordinated by Pastor Mark Ryman, NALC Communications Coordinator, the devotions are based on the daily Scripture readings from the *Lutheran Book of Worship* Daily Lectionary.

The recommended readings from the Daily Lectionary are active links at the top of each devotion. By clicking on the link and reading the assigned texts, the New Testament will be read each year and most of the Old Testament will be read over the two-year cycle of readings.

NALC pastors are encouraged to volunteer to write some of the devotions. Contact Pastor Mark Ryman for more information or to volunteer at mryman@thenalc.org.

"The NALC daily devotions set the tone for my day, focusing me on the Lord, reminding me of my own need for forgiveness and God's willingness to forgive me, as I go out to offer the same to others," said Pastor William Maki of Zion Lutheran Church in St. Marys, Ohio. "Because these devotions are available on the NALC website, they are beneficial for the faith development of all our people. As word of this gets out, more and more people might include the NALC as a place they go to each day for spiritual food."



***Isaiah 62:1-5, 10-12; Revelation 19:11-16;
Matthew 1:18-25***

Though you try for a lifetime, you will never save yourself. Salvation is a feat of the Lord; his people are redeemed by God's Word alone. This is why the prophets say that the Lord will not be quiet until his Bride, the Israel of God (Galatians 6:16), is righteous. God accomplishes righteousness and salvation through the sharp sword of his mouth (Hebrews 4:12; Revelation 1:16), the Word of God. The Lord is not silent, but wields his sword, the Word of God, striking down your sin and unrighteousness.

This is fully accomplished in Jesus, who is the living Word of God (John 1:1-14). Jesus, the Word made flesh, is the exact imprint of God's nature. He is the word of power (Hebrews 1:3) that upholds the whole universe yet, stooped to save your soul. Jesus was born a man and lived among us, and he is still with us — Immanuel. The Word of God is true and faithful to remain among us, never silent, always crying after us, "Behold, your salvation comes!"

Prayer: O Word of God, help me to trust you in this new year and always. Amen.

*Today's devotion was written by Pastor Mark Ryman,
Communications Coordinator for the NALC.*

This devotion from January 1 is an example of the daily devotions featured on the NALC website and in the North American Lutheran Church Facebook group.

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.

The 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. James Nestingen, Professor Emeritus at Luther Seminary and an Adjunct Professor for the NALS. Dr. Nestingen and the Rev. Dr. Amy Schiffrin, President of the NALS and Associate Professor of Liturgy and Homiletics at Trinity School for Ministry, will lead preaching 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.

Congregations consider ratification

NALC congregations are considering several amendments to the NALC constitution that were approved by the 2015 NALC Convocation. The proposed amendments are all related to a change in the 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 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.

Mission trip to Congo

By Pastor David Nuottila

How often have you wondered what it might be like to go to a far-off place, meet people of a much different culture, and share with them the good news of Christ our Lord?

I had not really envisioned such an experience; that is, until my friend and fellow pastor Stephané Kalonji told me about his mission work in his native Democratic Republic of Congo.

As we spoke, I could feel the Holy Spirit calling me in real ways to go with him. Finally, I asked Pastor Stephané if he would like me to accompany him on his next trip. I cannot begin to describe the surprise and joyful look on his face as he said, "Yes."

After months of preparation, we finally left for Congo in late August of 2015 and landed in Kinshasa, the capitol city. Immediately, I became aware of the hardships of daily living.

There is no gradual acclimation, no settling in. The conditions are what they are. Food, clean water, and electricity are all scarce. The extreme conditions are met by people with a strong yearning for wholeness in life.

Still, as we met the next morning with pastors from the Lutheran Church in Kinshasa, the joy of mission in Christ's name came instantly to the forefront.

Pastor Kalonji and I traveled with the purpose of preaching the Gospel and leading seminars for pastors and lay leaders. Our schedule would see us travel to the port city of Boma, about 300 miles away, and remain there for four days. Due to road conditions, the drive took over 15 hours to complete.



Pastors who attended the seminar on the Mission of the Church in Boma in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. NALC Pastors Stephané Kalonji and David Nuottila traveled to Congo to lead the seminar.

While in Boma, we led a seminar for pastors on the Mission of the Church, and a seminar on Forgiveness and Reconciliation for the women.

Pastors and lay leaders traveled great distances to attend these seminars. Considering the difficulty of travel in such a place, I was quite taken by their response.

I am so very thankful that, as he became aware of our plan to go to Congo, Pastor Didi Panzo (an NALC global worker through World Mission Prayer League) agreed to join us for two days. He was in neighboring Angola and offered to serve as my interpreter.

Pastor Panzo's presence was such a blessing. He described all that was going on, related stories of others, and put my English words into the native tongues of others so that we could all enjoy hearing the good news of Christ.

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The men and women of Congo are so hungry for the Gospel and so eager to learn of God's goodness and mercy. Each daylong seminar was broken into segments, and each segment began with singing.

All day long, everywhere you went, the people of God in Boma are singing songs of thankfulness and praise. Even though they have so little in the way of material goods to be thankful for, they know God is with them. I can still hear their singing, even as I am miles and months removed from them.



Pastors Kalonji and Nuottila assist in feeding orphaned children in Boma.

Our first Sunday in Congo brought with it my opportunity to preach the gospel in worship. Pastor Kalonji hinted to me that I would be afforded as much time to preach as I would like. Sermons of an hour or more are the norm, so I need not feel rushed. Considering all we had experienced so far, the sermon I had prepared in advance was not the message God would have me share.

Days went by, and collecting thoughts proved difficult. In His goodness, God answered my prayers of desperation. The hymn, "I Love to Tell the Story" came to mind. "Tell them the story, David." was the message from God. And so, having Pastor Kalonji read to the congregation the account of the Road to

Emmaus, I did my best to tell the story of Christ as told by Moses and the prophets. God gave me the words, my friend put them in the language of my hearers, and I preached good news for over an hour and 15 minutes.

Following our service of worship, which lasted many hours, we shared another blessing with the people in Boma. Pastor Kalonji has made it a practice to bring with him donated pairs of eyeglasses for those who do not have access. In years past, he would bring a few dozen pairs and distribute them.

On this trip, however, with the help of the congregations of Reformation Lutheran Church in New Bern, N.C., Union Lutheran Church in Salisbury, N.C., and St. John's Lutheran Church, in Asheboro, N.C., we distributed nearly 250 pairs of eyeglasses.

Many of those who received the glasses had waited for years for such a blessing. One woman, in her gratitude, embraced Pastor Kalonji and told him it was the first pair of glasses she ever owned.

The Lutheran Church in Boma is also one that ministers to a large group of orphaned children. On this day, Pastor Kalonji and I



Pastor Didi Panzo interprets for Pastor David Nuottila.

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were blessed to provide food for these children and to help fill their bowls with a hot meal. In most instances, this meal of rice, beans and a small piece of fish would be their only meal that particular day. After the orphans were fed, children from the community were invited to share in the meal. They too may not have a warm meal waiting for them at home. Such are the conditions in Boma.

The pain of hunger, especially as worn on the faces of small children, changes a person. Later that evening, news came that some of the local children could not eat before the food ran out. Suddenly, my simple meal of a plate of rice took on another meaning. Thankfully there was no electricity that evening and the room was dark. In quietness, I ate my supper while holding back the tears.

Our final morning in Boma brought with it the opportunity to see the parish's farming project. On a donated piece of land, and with help from Pastor Kalonji (and now the NALC's Carolinas Mission District), the Lutheran Church established a farm



Pastors Panzo, Kalonji and Nuottila enjoy time with the women and children in Boma.

which will one day produce food for the community. Hunger is a grave concern in Congo. Small monetary donations have a way of adding up when used by God's faithful people. Bishop M. Keya (Lutheran Church of Congo), Pastor Ngoma (Lutheran Parish in Boma) and other church leaders oversee this project.

There is so much more I could share concerning this mission trip, but space does not allow me to go on. I can say that Pastor Stephané Kalonji is a man with a heart for mission, and he has been a great teacher for me. His willingness to take me along is something for which I will always be grateful. I will also treasure the relationships I have found with the pastors and people in Boma and Kinshasa. I look forward to seeing them all once again and sharing with them the joy of being children of our Loving heavenly Father.



Farming project of the Lutheran Parish in Boma.

Pastor Stephané Kalonji is an NALC pastor serving Reformation Lutheran Church in New Bern, N.C., where he lives with his wife and three daughters. Pastor David Nuottila is an NALC pastor serving Union Lutheran Church in Salisbury, N.C., where he lives with his wife and two daughters.

Tools of the Trade in a Mission-Driven Culture

By Pastor Scott Ness

I'm pretty forgetful. Sometimes I forget where I am going while driving. I frequently get to my car and have to go back into my office to get something I left behind. Just today my wife had to drop my medication off as she ran errands.

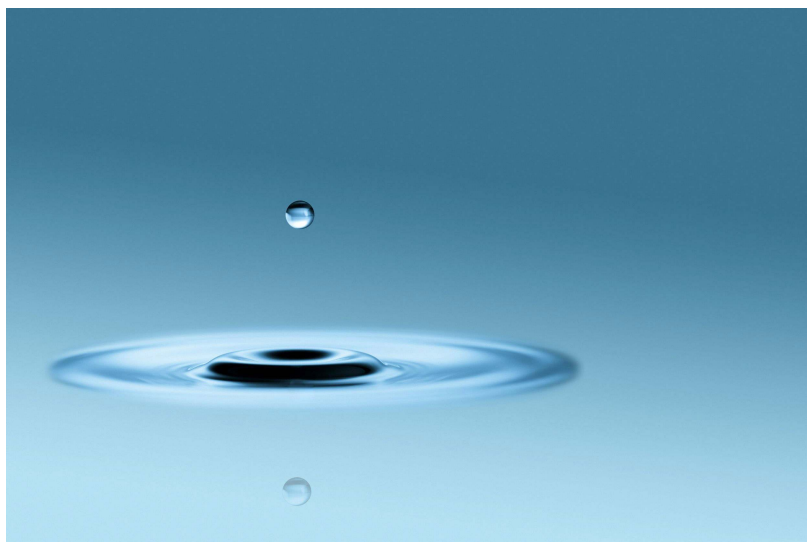
I forget lots of stuff. Constantly. And, whenever I realize I have forgotten something, I have a quick internal dialogue with myself. "Do I really need it or can I fake it/get by without it/profess my deep apologies and redeem myself the next time?" All of this takes a matter of a few seconds. And, most of the time, I determine that turning the car around is not necessary.

But, there is one item that I almost always turn around to go back and pick up off of the kitchen counter — my phone. I'll admit that my phone and I have a little bit of a co-dependent relationship. It depends on me to keep it charged and to go back and get it when I leave it places. I depend on it to keep track of my calendar, my contacts, my to-do lists, and all manner of other things.

Is it unhealthy? Maybe a little. Maybe a lot. But it is also the world where I live. This is the world that we live in today. As such, I've had one major question rattling around in my head for the better part of three years. How can we turn these handheld computers into a tool for discipleship? How can I pivot on the way that I use my phone so that it helps me to follow Jesus better?

At the NALC Mission Festival, held in Hilliard, Ohio, in November, I had the opportunity to wrestle with this question out loud and to share some of the responses to those questions that the NALC has come up with recently.

Drops From the Well has been a Scripture delivery service that the NALC Missions Office has offered since this summer. The concept is simple. Most of our congregations follow a lectionary for our readings and preaching.



To have Drops in Focus (the weekly lock screen image) delivered to your phone, text the word "Focus" to 614-328-5636.

As such, a team has been working to whittle down those readings to one key point and one key verse. Those who subscribe to **Drops From the Well** then have that key verse texted to their phones (or emailed) every Sunday evening.

In a perfect world, you were in worship on Sunday and you heard the Word of God. Perhaps the sermon keyed in on the same key verse. Perhaps not. But, you heard that Word and now, you have it sent to your phone so that you can read it over and over again throughout the week. Would it be a step in the right direction of discipleship to have this one key verse imprinted on your heart through the week? It could be a start.

As with most things, version 2.0 builds upon the initial idea and makes it better. I'd like to introduce you to **Drops in Focus**. The concept is similar, but the fruit is much riper. Perhaps you, like me, get a bunch of text messages throughout the week. It doesn't take long for my **Drops From the Well** message to get buried under a long list of other messages. So, our team continued to dream about ways to keep the Word right under our nose.

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Drops in Focus utilizes the same technology, but instead of sending you the verse in a text, it is delivered to your phone in a picture image each week. The goal is to save this image to your phone and set it as your lock screen image. We started using this lock screen image in Advent in the congregation I serve. The results are incredible.

Every time I turn on my phone the first thing I see is that verse of Scripture. The image shows me a deeper level of the Scripture, and it connects with how our brains are wired. With this simple shift, I have a simple verse of Scripture on the forefront of my mind every time I check my email on my phone; every time I look at Facebook; every time I send a quick note; every time I check my calendar. The Word of God becomes the filter that I live my life through. The sacrifice is that I had to take down the wonderful picture of my wife and me at a wedding this summer. I love that picture and I love my wife. But, the truth is, I am a better husband today because the Word of God is front and center, and one piece of that puzzle was replacing my lock screen picture. I'd like to invite you to join us on this journey as Drops from the Living Water come into the focus of our lives.

If you already receive **Drops from the Well** texted to your phone, that will continue. We hope to eventually provide a way to cancel Drops from the Well for those who only wish to receive the image.

As our mission teams continue to drive our Drops initiative, know that it has helped the NALC Missions Office to synchronize many of our messages and deliveries.

Discipleship Moments have been short video clips, predominately from the executive staff, to help teach, inspire, and guide our church.

Each week the Discipleship Moment aligns with the week's "Drop" as a way to unify our message; a way of submitting our communication to the Word of God; and as a way to help our broad footprint of the NALC to be united by the one thing that truly unites us as mission driven.

Finally, **Mission Connect** is very similar in delivery, but different in content. **Mission Connect** is a way to keep in touch with a variety of missions that are taking place across our nation and across our globe. One week you might receive prayer requests from a variety of mission fields. The next week you could hear a domestic story of mission. The third week may be a story of a project that could use your support. And, the fourth week could be a story of mission from a foreign missionary.

To sign up for **Mission Connect** text the word "connect" to 619-356-2910.

Drops From the Well, Drops in Focus, Discipleship Moments and **Mission Connect** are all great but simple tools that have been helpful on this journey. In the midst of my forgetfulness, they have kept the word at the forefront. May they be that gift and blessing to you, your family, and congregation, as well.

Pastor Scott Ness serves St. John's Evangelical Lutheran Church in Grove City, Ohio. He is a member of the NALC's Mission Team and Communication Team.



Learn how to set an image as wallpaper or a lock screen:

Apple: <http://apple.co/1ScnAXM>

Android: <http://abt.cm/1mP4GIO>

Epiphany – Making Christ Known

Dear Followers of Christ Jesus,

The transition from the season of Christmas to the season of Epiphany is upon us. The word *Epiphany* means manifestation. To make manifest means to make evident, to show plainly. It is a transition in which the obscure becomes clear, the unknown becomes known, the hidden becomes exposed, the closed becomes open, the covered is revealed, the private becomes public, and the invisible becomes visible. The season of manifestation is time to celebrate the ways in which Jesus manifests His identity as Savior, Redeemer, Lord, and God in person.

The wise men are the first to identify Jesus. Their visit signals that His is no ordinary birth but an event of cosmic proportion. He is not only a king, but the King of Kings. At His Baptism we read about the Holy Spirit and the declaration that He is the Son of God. During His temptation in the wilderness we read about His confrontation with Satan and His power to prevail against evil.

Throughout the Epiphany season we read about the variety of signs and wonders Jesus performed to manifest who He is and why He came. The words of others also reveal who Jesus is. John the Baptist announces that Jesus is “the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.” Andrew, a disciple of John, tells his brother that Jesus is the Messiah, the Christ. Each text is a reminder of why our hearts are filled with joy at His birth, because we know who He is: Christ our Lord.

I must confess that in my own preaching and teaching on these texts I am always tempted to focus on the theological assertions of the Incarnation and its mystery or explaining the implications of the various understanding of Jesus’ identity manifest in each of the Gospel texts of the Epiphany season.

My fear is that my use of so many theological assertions and understandings only created greater obscurity. Instead of making Him manifest, I have unfortunately made Him as abstract as our theological vocabulary. This is in direct opposition



From the Bishop

Bishop John Bradosky

to the nature of the season of Epiphany, making Christ manifest.

Our word manifest comes from the Latin *manifestus* which means “to touch with the hand.”

The Christmas proclamation from the angels to the shepherds is this is good news of great joy for *you*. For unto *you* is born this day in the city of David a Savior who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for *you*. The shepherds responded to this proclamation by obediently going to see what had been proclaimed to them. Perhaps they were close enough for His infant-sized hand to touch theirs.

Martin Luther reminds us, “No matter where you’re reading in the Bible, faith is the mystery you should recognize. Faith is not believing that the story you’re reading is true as written. That does nothing for anyone. Even unbelievers can believe that this Bible story about Jesus’ birth is true. Faith is not a natural work apart from God’s grace, as the Scripture clearly teaches. Rather the right kind of faith, the kind that flows from grace and that God’s Word demands, is firmly believing that Christ was born for you. His birth is yours and occurred for your benefit.”

It is not merely the abstract proclamation of the birth of a Savior, nor is it good news in general. It is the birth of *our* Savior and good news for *you*!

Every manifestation of Jesus during this Epiphany season is designed to help us see clearly a Lord who is reaching out His hand to touch our lives with His grace. Jesus is God reaching out to take us by the hand. Jesus is God’s commitment to walk with

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us through all that life brings, hand-in-hand. He lays His hands on us to call us, guide us, and empower us with His Holy Spirit so that we can be instruments of His life-giving love and redeeming power in this world.

This touch with the hand is a powerful manifestation of Christ's presence in the Sacraments.

In Baptism nothing surpasses the intimacy of the gracious hand of Jesus on the baptized. The water, the Word, the sign of the cross and the laying on of hands are all part of the tangible work of the Holy Spirit. The physical touch manifests the profound truth of the Incarnation in ways that exceed any theological abstraction.

In the Eucharist, through the bread, the wine and the Word, we receive Christ's real presence. We touch, smell and taste the elements but they touch us in far deeper ways with the grace of Christ, in forgiveness, new life now, and the promise of life eternal. In distributing the elements I have never simply said, "The body of Christ" or "The blood of Christ." I will always add "for you." Here the abstract and the mysterious meet in the personal experience of the quality of faith Luther was describing. It is more than simply believing what the Word proclaims, but faith that holds that Christ comes to me through these earthly elements of bread and wine.

The implications of the manifestations of Christ's identity are powerful and overwhelming. They shape both our identity and our mission. Each congregation in the North American Lutheran Church is a community of faith in which people can come to see clearly and know with certainty who Jesus is so that they can trust and believe in Him completely through Word and Sacrament ministry, through faithful teaching and spiritual disciplines.

Jesus came so that we might experience God's Grace, His undeserved love for us. He came to redeem and save us. He came to guide and direct our lives as His disciples.

Each community of faith is a place where people can experience the grip of God's grace in Jesus as he takes each one of us by the hand and says,

"Follow me." They are communities of faith in which people hold the hands of one another to offer support, encouragement, direction, counsel and prayer. They are discipling communities with hands that stretch out to embrace the entire world and every person in it, because it is for those very people that Jesus came to offer His life for their redemption and salvation. We can't manifest Jesus unless we show plainly His powerful, life-giving love. We are here to make sure the hands of those not yet reached by the Gospel of Jesus touch the love of Jesus through the love we offer in ministry in His name and under His direction.

In this transition let us hold fast to those powerful words of Scripture: "to you," "for you," and "with you always."

Have a blessed Epiphany season!

NALC youth ministry resources offered by faithwebbing.com

The North American Lutheran Church is in partnership with faithwebbing.com to provide resources for youth ministry to NALC congregations. The faithwebbing.com website is up and running. Congregations now have access to topics and resources ranging from safeguarding to sample forms, templates, copyright laws, resource links and more.

Congregational leaders are asked to identify a Church Connector who will be their main connection to faithwebbing.com. Church Connectors will receive webinar announcements and updates on resources to pass along to your congregation.

Send an email to faithwebbing@gmail.com with the name of the Church Connector chosen for your congregation. Please include church name, town and state, plus the person's email address. A website invitation will be sent to the Connector. Once a connection is established a church can add more connectors.

On Pastors and Pastoral Leadership

If it's not readily apparent, my primary goal in writing this series of articles is to address "matters" of "ministry" within the NALC.

As I began serving in this position, it was titled "Ministry Coordinator," although that quickly changed to "Assistant to the Bishop for Ministry and Ecumenism." It sometimes seems it might be better expanded to be "Assistant for Ministry and Everything Else!" Nevertheless, my hope has been to provide articles that reflect upon, support and strengthen "ministry" in our new church body.

As I have the opportunity to visit with pastors and congregations, a recurring question has been: "What is a pastor?" And together with that: "What is pastoral leadership?"

The answers to these questions are too complex for one "Ministry Matters" monthly submission, so I have decided to dedicate every monthly article in 2016 to answering these two questions, or at least providing thoughtful reflections that might cause pastors, congregations, seminarians and others to give some thought to what it means to be a pastor, have a pastor, and lead as a pastor.

While it might seem such articles would be more appropriate shared only with pastors, the reality is that congregations are often as confused about the pastoral office and the nature of pastoral leadership as are clergy! I witness this first-hand as I work with call committees and councils in the call process, as well as in those situations where there is conflict and tension within the leadership team.

It may be that at one time in Lutheranism there was greater clarity and shared understanding regarding the pastor, the pastor's call, authority and leadership and how that related to lay leadership in the congregation. It is the case in many congregations today — and for many pastors — that there is now confusion about these matters, leaving pastor and parish unsure of how to relate to one another, how to lead the congregation, or how to resolve what are sometimes simple problems that are heaped up into a pile with other sometimes insignificant issues until what remains is an



Ministry Matters

Pastor David Wendel

Assistant to the Bishop
for Ministry and Ecumenism

insurmountable mound of, let's just say, "garbage" that smells up the church, hinders mission and ministry, and makes everyone's life unpleasant, to say the least.

My prayer is that these brief messages on the pastor and pastoral leadership may positively impact and shape pastors and ministry within our congregations so that all may find greater joy in the serving and visitors may be drawn to NALC communities that are healthy, thriving and focused on mission — not maintenance or worse, damage control.

The first question to ask, then, is "How is a pastor called?"

There has been, historically, some confusion about this in Lutheranism. Does the disciple of Jesus sense some inner "call" from God that is in itself validation that God intends for this person to be a pastor? Does the larger church have any role in this, or should the bishop and other pastors "get out of the way" and let God simply work in the heart and life of the potential pastor? How are the Church and the local congregation assured that this person is truly called, and not sensing something that is not God's call, but the result of their own unhealthiness, neediness, or desire for wielding power in the church over others?

From my entrance into seminary 38 years ago, it has been abundantly clear that there are many reasons why individual Christians enter seminary and think they are supposed to be a pastor in Christ's Church — and not all reasons are godly, spiritual, or valid. Let's just summarize these reasons by saying they may be "self-serving."

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Any Christian who wakes up one day and says, “Jesus visited me last night in a dream and told me to go to seminary and be a pastor” ought to be tested to discern the spirit/Spirit, with proper conversation, reflection, and questioning whether this is of God or the result of some other agenda or urging.

Being called to serve as a pastor is not a right, nor can anyone claim to “deserve” to be a pastor, due to any personal vision, feeling, sense or supposed visit by the Holy Spirit. Yes, there must be some awareness of an “inner call” — which is different for most every person — but that’s not the whole of it.

For at the same time, Lutheranism has normally required an “external call” — from the Body of Christ affirming that truly, this person seems to have been called and thus the Church extends a formal call to the person.

This combination of internal and external call is a protection and safeguard for the pastor, the congregation, and the larger church. It does not deny the activity of the Holy Spirit in the life of the individual Christian, but it also recognizes that the Spirit is active in the community of the Church.

Together, the internal and external call work to discern the movement and activity of the Spirit with regard to God’s call to ministry. Neither is more important or valid in the call of a pastor.

Often, the inner sense of call comes first. The person enters seminary, connects with the denominational preparation or candidacy committee, and, throughout the education and pastoral preparation process, the Church seeks to discern God’s will with regard to this candidate.

Other times, it is the local congregation that sees in a young person the budding faith, character and growing discipleship which might lead one to believe this young man or woman could serve as a pastor. The congregation, then, encourages, supports and invites the person to begin to explore and pray about whether God might be calling them to pastoral service. The external sense, then, of the Body of Christ might actually foster or generate the inner sense.

However it happens, in the Lutheran tradition, there must be both the internal and external sense of call.

It should be said, however, that even the larger Church, working through the Pastoral Candidacy Committee, doesn’t extend a formal call or authorize a candidate for ordination apart from the activity and discernment of a congregation. In this sense, we do live out our Core Value in the NALC that we are Congregationally Focused.

Even if a candidate has a sense of an inner call from God and the NALC Candidacy Committee approves the person for ordination after proper study of Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions, together with pastoral formation, a candidate will not be ordained until and unless they receive a valid call — usually from a congregation, although the Executive Council may extend a call for special service, say, as a missionary or military or hospital chaplain. In these circumstances, however, there is usually the expectation that the candidate will first receive a congregational call and serve for a period of time as a pastor, prior to specialized ministry service.

Why this priority for a regular call from a congregation? First, our chief confessional document, the Augsburg Confession (Article 14), states that no one should preach or administer the sacraments without a “regular call.”

This call affirms that the Church, expressed through the local congregation, recognizes that God has called this person to serve as pastor, and that they will receive him or her as such, pray for him/her, work with him/her, and respect the pastor as God’s called shepherd of the congregation. Second, the regular call from the congregation confirms the call as being valid and of God, certifying, if you will, that the decisions of the Candidacy Committee and Bishop are correct.

It is the case that there have been times when a person experiences what they believe to be an internal sense of call. They have completed seminary studies and been examined and approved by the Candidacy Committee of the larger Church but, after extensive interviewing with congregations in the call process, they never receive a call to

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pastoral service. In this situation, the candidate will not be ordained as a pastor. Without a regular call from a congregation, the person normally is not considered to have been called by God to be a pastor.

Although the local congregation and the larger Church work together with the candidate in discerning God's call, the bottom line is the congregation and the sense of the faithful.

Does the congregation believe this person is called or not? If not, the person may continue to serve in the Church and the congregation, using their gifts and education in many ways, but as a layperson. In this, we trust the Holy Spirit, working through the Body of Christ, manifested primarily through the local community of Word and Sacrament.

I hope that this helps to explain, in short form, our understanding in Lutheranism and the NALC of how a person becomes a candidate for pastoral ministry, but even more, how the call to service is experienced, discerned and finally affirmed.

This is useful for those who may sense an inner call and be considering entering seminary, but it is also important for congregations to understand their critical role in lifting up and encouraging persons to consider pastoral ministry at the start, and in the final decision with regard to whether a person is "called."

It is also helpful for we who are pastors to be reminded, once again, of the important role of the congregation in discernment as it is God who calls us, yet through the Church — manifested in the local congregation.

Next month: "Why a Pastoral Office? Jesus says, 'Feed and Tend My Sheep!'"

NALS ends relationship with Gordon-Conwell

Four years ago, even before the formation of the North American Lutheran Seminary (NALC), Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary (GCTS), working with the Carolinas Mission District, made a significant step in developing a Lutheran House of Studies at the GCTS Charlotte, N.C., campus.

During a time of great need for us in the North American Lutheran Church, GCTS welcomed seven students and three faculty members who had formerly been at the Lutheran Theological Southern Seminary. In a spirit of generosity and Christian charity, GCTS provided an opportunity for these faculty to continue teaching and for the students to continue their theological education. We in the NALC continue to be deeply grateful to GCTS for assisting and supporting us at a time when we lacked resources for our own students.

In spite of this positive beginning, the Board of Regents of the NALS has voted to discontinue our relationship with GCTS effective May 31, 2016. The NALC Executive Council adopted the Board of Regents' recommendation.

There are a number of reasons that have led the Board of Regents to make this difficult but necessary decision. Our students have indicated that the language expectations at GCTS are unmanageable. Others have reported to us that the curriculum and other aspects of GCTS mean that students typically require five to six years to complete their Master of Divinity (M.Div.) work — compared to a more typical four-year M.Div. track. Our students have also experienced difficulty in completing a full year of internship within the overall GCTS curricular program. Internship is a non-negotiable requirement for ordination in the NALC. Finally, the Board of Regents is unaware of any NALC students in our candidacy process who are enrolled in the M.Div. track at the GCTS Charlotte campus. The M.Div. is also a requirement for ordination in the NALC.

The NALS is still in its infancy and relationships with partner institutions take an enormous amount of time to develop and nurture. We are carefully exploring emerging options, focusing our efforts where academic goals are mutually shared. We ask for your continued prayers as we grow a strong and healthy seminary program for the NALC.

Letter of Counsel on Marriage and Religious Freedom

The following Letter of Counsel was written by Dr. Robert Benne and approved by the NALC Commission on Theology and Doctrine in December.

**Letter of Counsel
with regard to the
U.S. Supreme Court decision
of June 26, 2015,
in which in a 5-4 decision it held that:**

The Fourteenth Amendment requires a State to license a marriage between two people of the same sex and to recognize a marriage between two people of the same sex when their marriage was lawfully licensed and performed out-of-State.

Regardless of whether we agree with the decision that finds a right to same-sex marriage in the Constitution, the fact is that now it is the law of the land. This presents great challenges to the free exercise of religion of the church, its related institutions, private Christian enterprises, and Christian individuals. We now have a legal, public definition of marriage that diverges dramatically from Christian teaching. Though same-sex marriage would have been unthinkable even in the civil sphere for everyone until very recent times, the divergence between church and civil marriage was anticipated early on. Already in Luther's time he taught that civil marriage and Christian marriage are two different things, though the civil definition was powerfully conditioned by Christian teaching. He argued that civil marriage ought to be available to couples (everyone assumed they would be heterosexual) who committed themselves to a life-long pledge of faithfulness, not just to Christians in good standing with the church, which had been the Roman Catholic requirement. For Luther, marriages blessed in the church involved higher standards than those performed in the public sphere. Thus, from Reformation times until now in Germany, Christians have two ceremonies — one by the

magistrate and one in the church. C.S. Lewis, already in the 1940s, perceived that the idea of marriage promulgated by the state was sharply divergent from that of the Christian church. He, too, supported two different rites.

This dual approach to marriage is something the NALC corporately ought seriously to consider, now that the public definition contrasts so sharply with Christian teaching on marriage. Such a withdrawal from being an agent of the state is perhaps the best way to protect the free exercise of the church's teaching on and practice of marriage.

It is quite likely that the First Amendment will be interpreted by the courts to allow for the religious freedom to teach and practice Christian marriage within the church. But it is possible that churches will be punished for doing so by various public sanctions, e.g., the loss of tax exemptions for its property, as well as those for its institutions. Or the church and its institutions might lose the right for its contributors to receive tax deductions for their gifts. The church will also be subject to contempt by sectors of the society who have embraced the world's new definition of marriage.

At any rate, it is clear that no court, Supreme or otherwise, or secular establishment can define marriage for the church. The biblical definition of the First Institution founded by God before the Fall (Genesis 1:26-28, 2:21-25), and the reiteration of that definition by Jesus (Matthew 19: 4-7, Mark 10: 6-9) as well as the consistent teaching of the church throughout the millennia, offer a course of action that is plain: "We must obey God rather than any human authority." (Acts 5: 29) If penalties come its way, the church must be faithful to God's Word in spite of negative legal or cultural repercussions. It may live and flourish even with these sanctions against it; for example, many churches in Australia thrive even though contributors receive minimal tax relief for their gifts.

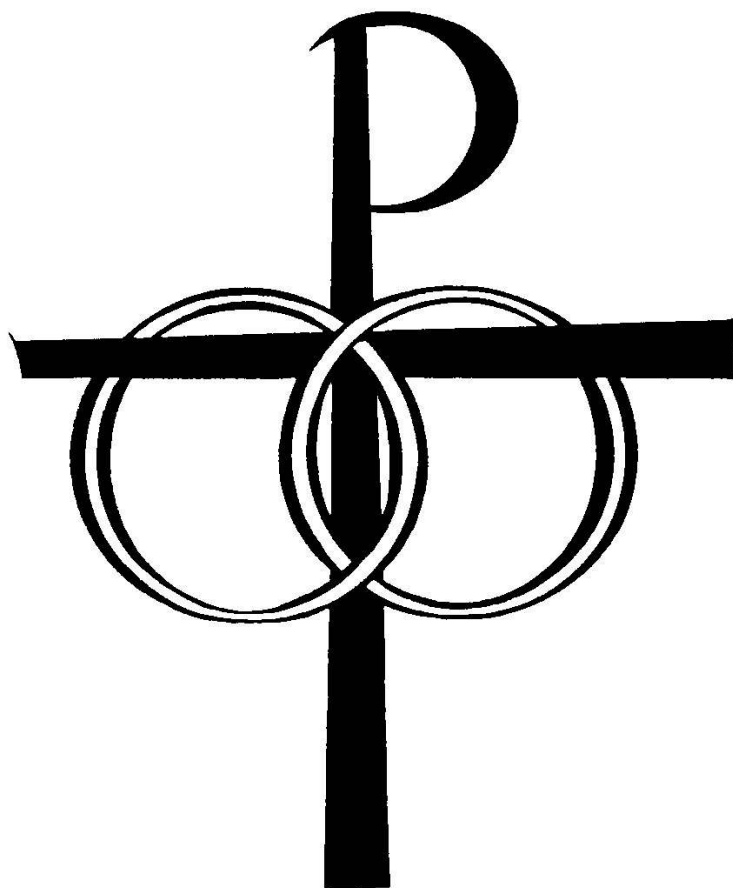
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Though it is doubtful that such curtailments of the church's exercise of religious freedom will be applied to the church itself, the same cannot be said for institutions related to the church. We have already seen how Catholic adoption agencies have decided to close down rather than buckle to the state's requirement that they offer adoption services for same-sex couples. Those church-related institutions that take any sort of federal or state money will likely be subject to the new federal and state requirements. This will be true of charitable institutions of all kinds, as well as schools and colleges. Sadly, this will be the case even if the public support is indirect, through grants to individuals, such as loans to students. However, it seems that the government (both federal and state) is more likely to exempt religious associations from federal and state non-discrimination laws if those associations are "pervasively religious," i.e., if they hire only members of their religious tradition.

It is important that such "pervasively religious" institutions be allowed to exercise their religious commitments in their own institutions. In such institutions it makes clear sense to claim that they should "obey God rather than any human authority." The NALC should publicly witness for such free exercise even though it has no vulnerable church-related institutions of its own. (Its seminary and house of studies are "pervasively religious" and presumably take little or no public money. It behooves them, for obvious reasons, to continue to preserve that status.)

Such institutions should be under no illusion that they will necessarily escape retaliatory public sanctions — loss of property tax exemptions or tax relief for contributions — or public opprobrium.

Business enterprises run by Christians or individual Christians in their work are even more vulnerable to public legal sanctions than the churches or their pervasively religious institutions. They are certainly vulnerable to vicious attacks through the social and public media. Even so, the Supreme Court did exempt a business run by committed Christians, Hobby Lobby, from including contraceptives it considered to be abortifacients from the medical insurance it offered its employees. But the Court's ruling was very narrowly drawn.



Such free exercise may be more strictly limited when it comes to issues surrounding same-sex marriage, but certain distinctions may be helpful in preserving the right to conduct one's enterprise and work according to one's religious convictions. First, a Christian enterprise or individual Christian should never discriminate against a person based upon who they are. Race, ethnic group, religion, sex, or sexual orientation cannot be grounds for refusing service or ministry. Such discrimination would be wrong morally as well as legally. So a Christian baker should not refuse to sell any of her regular products to anyone based upon who they are.

A crisis of conscience emerges when a customer wants the Christian to provide custom-made products for use in specific practices which violate Christian convictions regarding those practices. So, for example, a customer wants a Christian photographer to take photos at a same-sex wedding. Such a request ought to be able to be denied if the exercise of religious freedom means anything at all. Forcing people to participate in practices that violate their consciences is certainly a

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violation of the freedom to exercise one's religion, including its prohibitions. Indeed, one would hope that such a request would not be forthcoming from gay couples. Respect for the other's religious convictions would lead them to seek out photographers who had no such scruples, of whom there would likely be many.

A more extreme example might be offered to make our point: a group of Christians demand that an Orthodox Jewish butcher prepare and serve pork sandwiches for their picnic. Legally requiring such action on the part of the butcher would be a thorough destruction of free exercise. On the other hand, that same Orthodox butcher would be morally and legally wrong to refuse to sell his regular kosher products to a Christian who came into his shop.

The NALC should publicly witness for the religious freedom not to be forced to participate in practices that violate religious convictions, while at the same time supporting laws against discrimination based on the identity of the customer.

A complication arises when a Christian is in a public government role, as was a Kentucky county clerk when she refused to grant marriage licenses to same-sex couples. In such cases there are a number of options available. She might press for an accommodation for her religious beliefs by releasing her from her duty to offer marriage licenses because others in the office would do so in her stead. Or, since she has taken an oath to uphold the law but believes the law is wrong and following it would compromise her Christian convictions, she might quietly resign. (This seems to be the route suggested by the Lutheran two-kingdoms teaching. The law goes against God's will and therefore she cannot participate in it. Yet, she agrees that the law must be obeyed by those in a public role.) Or, she can simply accommodate herself to what she believes is a bad law.

At first it seems that the second alternative is the best one. Anarchy would ensue if governmental officials pick and choose what laws they wish to follow or enforce. Yet, that might be too passive a stance. Perhaps the request for accommodation would bring public attention to the need to

accommodate those many citizens for whom what is legally demanded is not morally acceptable. Such instances will arise more frequently as secular interpretations of the law replace those based on religiously-based moral convictions. It will make for social peace if such accommodations can be reached.

If such accommodation is not forthcoming, it may well behoove Christians to disobey the law but take the consequences, which might include dismissal, fines, or even imprisonment. This strategy was followed frequently in the civil rights struggle of the late 1950s. Or, short of that more dramatic path, to make a very public statement about the reason for their forced resignation or dismissal. In either case "the world" is being shown that it is departing from God's law, which will have grave consequences for our common life.

Christians might well be called to such sorts of actions, or to support such actions if they are done without malice or threat. The NALC should be attentive to members who sense the call to such actions.*

While there are many more instances where the First Amendment's guarantee of the free exercise of religion will be challenged, right now they seem focused on sexuality issues. Therefore, this letter of counsel has naturally been concerned about those areas. The church must pay close attention to these issues. The free exercise of religion, which this country has so prized, is at stake.

* In the NALC Braaten-Benne Lectures in Theology of 2015 on the subject of martyrdom, an interesting set of distinctions was made. "Witnessing" means publicly proclaiming Christian truth when there will likely be no negative repercussions for that action. "Confessing" means public proclamation in a context in which serious deprivations are likely, such as the loss of one's job. "Martyrdom" means proclamation in the face of possible death. Christians in America are not threatened by death for their beliefs and practices, but they may soon be called upon not only to witness but to confess. The church should have the courage to both witness and confess, while it should offer support to those who also choose to do both.



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March for Life is Jan. 22

The 2016 March for Life will be on Friday, Jan. 22, in Washington, D.C.

The day will begin with a worship service at 8:30 a.m. at D.A.R. Constitution Hall. Gov. Samuel Brownback of Kansas will be honored at the service for his contributions to the pro-life cause.

After the service, NALC members will meet with other Lutheran groups and participate in the March for Life. The March for Life Rally will take place at noon on the grounds of the Washington Monument. The March will begin at approximately 1 p.m.

NALC Bishop John Bradosky, as well as other members of the NALC Executive Council and other NALC members will participate.

NALC members in the Washington, D.C., area may be able to house out-of-town NALC participants. If you have any questions about the March for Life or NALC housing options, contact Pastor Dennis Di Mauro at dennisdimauro@yahoo.com.

You can learn more about the March for Life at marchforlife.org.

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3500 Mill Run Drive
Hilliard, OH 43026-7770

Phone: 614-777-5709

www.thenalc.org

Pastor David J. Baer, editor
news@thenalc.org

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