

ALL OR NOTHING

EASTER MESSAGE FROM BISHOP DAN SELBO

Not long before Jesus was brought before Pontius Pilate, put on trial and sentenced to death, there was a gathering of the religious leaders who were trying to decide what to do with this man called the Christ. They were talking about all of the things Jesus had done and how, as a result, many people were beginning to follow Him. The bottom line was, if it continued happening, they were concerned what might happen to them.

That's when one of the leaders named Caiaphas, the High Priest that year, made an interesting statement. Concerned about Jesus and about what His continued ministry would mean for them, in arguing for finding a way to put Jesus to death, here's what he said: He said, "You know nothing at all! You do not realize that it is better for you and for us that one man die for the people than the whole nation perish" (John 11:49-50 NIV).

What's interesting about that statement from Caiaphas is that it's the same thing God said when He made the decision to send Jesus into the world. It's the same thing God chose to do when He allowed His only Son to die on a cross.

Easter is an "All or Nothing" event. It's the culmination of everything God had planned and prepared from the beginning of time. It's the climax to the story. It's the final word in what God has said and done for us. And it's that event which



[Resurrection of Christ in stained glass window from Saint Julie Billiart Catholic Church in Hamilton, Ohio.](#) Photo by Nheyob is licensed under [CC BY-SA 4.0](#).

brings all other events in the history of the world together and that places every other event that has ever happened throughout history in its proper place.

Let's start with the life of Jesus. Not even the life of Jesus means much without Easter. His was an interesting life, a fascinating life, a life unlike any other. But it wasn't a long life. It was actually a rather short life. Thirty-three years, from the time He was born until the time He died.

It was also a rather insignificant life, at least in terms of what He accumulated. He never owned a home. He never had any amount of wealth. When He died, all He had left were the clothes on His back, and before He died, they even took those and rolled dice for them among the guards.

He didn't do much traveling either. In spite of all of the journeys He took with His disciples, He never ended up more than 30 miles from where He was born. Nonetheless, the life of Jesus Christ has left a mark on human history that is unparalleled in all of history.

Almost every moral code that exists today is built upon the teachings of Jesus Christ. Two thousand years have come and gone and no one has come up with a better set of moral teachings than the ones given to us by Jesus.

He was also the greatest miracle worker who has ever lived. In the four gospels alone, there are more than 40 different miracles attested to, touching on a wider range of miraculous events than one could imagine.

There are also more historical references about the life of Jesus than there are about any other historical figure who ever lived. There are more books written, more references made, more historical connections to the life of Jesus Christ than with any other person in history.

Despite its brevity, its lack of worldly accumulation and geographic breadth, there was never a life before Jesus that had ever come close, and there

has never been a life since that is even in the same ballpark. Not one.

Having said that, that's not what set His life apart. What set His life apart were the claims He made about Himself, about who He was, about the connection in His life He had with God, and about how in your life and in my life, without an ongoing connection with Him, you and I will never understand or know what it means to live.

He said, "I and the Father are one" (John 10:30). He said, "I am the one who can set you free" (John 8:36). He said, "If you want to end up in heaven, then apart from me there is no other way" (John 14:6). He also said, "I'll prove it to you by dying on a cross and three days later coming back to life" (Mark 9:31).

It's "All or Nothing" in the life of Jesus. It's either true or it's not. If it's true, then it means everything. If it's not true, then it means nothing. But it can't work both ways. It's also "All or Nothing" in the death of Jesus.

Again, read through the stories. In each of the four Gospels, Jesus makes an intentional decision to end up in Jerusalem where He knows what's going to happen. On several occasions, He predicts it. At the hands of the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, I'm going to be beaten, whipped and killed, put to death on a tree. And I'm going to do it because "for this reason I was born" (John 18:37).

That's what the name Jesus means: "one who saves." Jesus came to save us. Jesus came to save you. It was His purpose for coming into this world. Jesus is the only person who has ever lived who was born to die.

Everyone else tries to avoid it. No one wants to die. Not even Jesus wanted to die. But Jesus was destined to die. He was born to die. And He was born to die so that you and I could live.

It was "All or Nothing" in the death of Jesus. Either He would willingly walk the path to His death, or you and I would forever end up in the grave. Either the deceiving and destructive power of sin would be

conquered and destroyed on the cross, or its power and deception would leave us forever trapped in ours.

And so, Jesus went to the cross and to His death so that you and I could have life. He never called it off and walked away, in order that the power of sin and death would be called off and there would be another way for us.

It was “All or Nothing” in the life of Jesus. It was “All or Nothing” in the death of Jesus. It was also “All or Nothing” in the resurrection of Jesus.

So important was Easter that the Christian faith stands or falls on whether Jesus Christ was raised from the dead. Everything we teach and believe in the Church is based upon whether Easter really happened.

If it happened, then what Jesus claimed about Himself and who He was, and why He lived and died, it's all true. If it happened, everything He said about Himself and about life and about where you and I can find life is true.

But if it didn't happen, then everything He said and did and claimed for Himself is a farce. It's false news. It's made up. And those who believe it, as hopeful and sincere as they might be, have only been set-up.

That's how important Jesus' resurrection from the dead is. If it didn't happen, then none of what we teach and believe matters. But if it did happen, and if the witness of those first disciples, and the early Church, and the 2,000 years of history ever since have any connection with actual fact, then the fact is that there is no middle ground when it comes to the response you and I make.

You cannot have it both ways when it comes to Jesus. Either He is the Savior of the world, or He is not. Either He was the Son of God who willingly gave His life for us, or He wasn't. But if He was the Savior of the world, then He must also be, if you want anything to do with Him at all, the Lord of your life.

There is no question that you and I live in what is often called a “post-truth” world. The dictionary defines “post-truth” as “relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief.”

In other words, the word “post-truth” doesn't mean “after truth,” as much as it implies an atmosphere of belief in which anyone can believe what they want to believe because for them what they believe is their own “truth.” We are living today in what has become for many a self-proclaimed, self-structured, self-serving “post-truth” world.

Here's the truth: No one can change the truth. If something is true, then it's true, no matter what anyone might think. My or your opinion, or public opinion, does not change the truth. Truth is truth, and that's the truth.

Here's another truth: Jesus was who He claimed He was. He was the Son of God. He was the Author of Life. And He is the only one in this life who can give ultimate and lasting meaning to your life. He is the only one.

And not only that, but the truth is that Jesus did die on a cross. He was nailed to a tree. He gave up His life willingly so that you and I could have ours. And He did come back to life. He was raised on the third day by His Heavenly Father. And the disciples saw Him. They talked with Him, ate with Him, were able to touch and experience Him. And for more than 2,000 years since, hundreds of millions of people have come to know Him as well.

That's the truth. And those truths are “All or Nothing” truths about Jesus Christ. You can't pretend that it's true and that it matters and then live as if it does not, because not only will you be missing out, you'll also be losing out.

And so let me close with this. In this so-called “post-truth” world in which we live, you need to decide for yourself what's true. You need to figure out for yourself what you believe about Jesus Christ. And when you do, you need to let what you believe and know to be the truth shape how you live.

Continued on Page 15

NOMINATIONS SOUGHT FOR 2023 MISSION CONVOCAION

The NALC Nominating Committee is receiving the names of candidates to serve in positions to be elected at the 2023 NALC Mission Convocation, Aug. 9-11, in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.

The 2023 Mission Convocation will elect the NALC bishop to a four-year term as well as one lay person and one pastor to four-year terms on the NALC Executive Council.

The 2023 Mission Convocation will also elect two members to the Court of Adjudication. Both pastors and lay members may be elected to the Court of Adjudication.

Information on the nominating process including the nomination form and descriptions of the positions

is available online at thenalc.org/nominations. All nominations must be submitted electronically.

To prepare for the nomination and election process for bishop, the Executive Council has prepared a booklet of prayers encouraging NALC congregations and members to engage in prayer and discernment leading up to the election.

The Nominating Committee is asking that nominations be submitted by May 1 to allow the committee time to compile biographical information and meet the constitutional deadline to distribute it to NALC members 90 days prior to the convocation.

Questions may be addressed to the Nominating Committee at nominations@thenalc.org.

REGISTRATION IS OPEN FOR 2023 LUTHERAN WEEK

Registration is now open for the NALC's 2023 Lutheran Week, Aug. 8-11, at the Omni Oklahoma City Hotel in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.

The 2023 NALC Mission Convocation will be held Wednesday, Aug. 9, through Friday, Aug. 11. Registration fee is \$275 and includes lunch on both Thursday and Friday and a banquet on Thursday night. The convocation will begin at 1:30 p.m. on Wednesday. It is scheduled to conclude at 5 p.m. on Friday.

The Carl E. Braaten-Robert D. Benne Lectures in Theology are set for Tuesday afternoon and Wednesday morning, Aug. 8-9. Registration fee is \$150 and includes lunch on Wednesday.

A Faith Formation Festival is set for Tuesday, Aug. 8, and Wednesday, Aug. 9. The festival promises to include "everything you want to know about youth and family ministry." Cost is \$120 and includes lunch on both days. The Faith Formation Festival begins at 8 a.m. on Tuesday and concludes with lunch on Wednesday.

The Women of the NALC Gathering is on Tuesday, Aug. 8. It begins at 8:30 a.m. and is scheduled to conclude at 5:30 p.m. Registration fee is \$100 and includes lunch.

All events are open to both delegates and visitors. Go to lutheranweek.com to register or for more information.

EMPOWERING FUTURE LEADERS

NALC CANDIDACY COMMITTEE MEETS

*By Pastor Amy C. Little and
Deacon Andrew S. Ames Fuller*

The North American Lutheran Church is constantly working to equip and empower future leaders across the continent.

At the March 7 meeting of the NALC Candidacy Committee, our dedicated pastors, committee members and Bishop Dan Selbo came together to discuss and make important decisions that will shape the future of the NALC.

The meeting, led by newly-appointed chairperson Pastor Jerry Merkouris, was an opportunity to review past meeting minutes, discuss new candidates and plan for upcoming events.

In this spirit, the committee endorsed Luke Beaver for internship, and also approved several candidates for ordination, including Justin Baker, Lara Bhasin, Ben Blobaum and Ben McCrimmon — all graduates of the North American Lutheran Seminary (NALS).

These future leaders have demonstrated their dedication to the NALC and will be instrumental in spreading the Word of God and serving our community.

Updates on internships were also shared during the meeting. Terese Whitten is interning at St. Mark's Lutheran Church in Salisbury, North Carolina, and Luke Beaver is set to begin a two-year internship at Lord of Life Lutheran Church in Memphis, Tennessee.

In addition to these crucial decisions, the committee celebrated Pastor Evan McClanahan and Pastor



These future NALC pastors, from left, Ben McCrimmon, Justin Baker, Lara Bhasin, Ben Blobaum were recently approved for ordination by the NALC Candidacy Committee.

Jerry Merkouris completing their first three-year terms on the committee. Both members agreed to serve for another three years.

The meeting concluded with plans for upcoming meetings in 2023 and 2024, including entrance, endorsement and approval gatherings in different locations. These events will provide opportunities for prayer, worship and building relationships between the committee members and our candidates.

The NALC is committed to fostering a culture that nurtures and empowers future leaders. Our Candidacy Committee's decisions and actions during the March meeting reflect this dedication to cultivating a strong and vibrant future for the North American Lutheran Church. As we continue to grow and develop, we look forward to the positive impact our new leaders will have on the lives of those they serve and the broader church.

BUILDING A STRONG FUTURE

STRATEGIES FOR RAISING UP NALC PASTORS

By Deacon Andrew S. Ames Fuller

The North American Lutheran Church has embarked on an ambitious journey to cultivate 300 well-prepared pastors within the next decade.

With the steadfast support of Bishop Dan Selbo and the 2020 Vision, the NALC Candidacy Committee (led by Pastor Jerry Merkouris) and the NALC Ordination Under Special Circumstances Candidacy Committee (headed by Pastor Patti Morlock) have taken up the challenge to realize this vision.

Pastor Jeff Morlock, director of vocational discernment, has implemented a diverse array of strategies to discover prospective pastoral candidates from various backgrounds, such as high school, college and second career professionals.

One innovative approach involves partnering with “feeder” institutions, such as camps, schools and colleges, which have proven successful in identifying potential candidates for ministry. By nurturing these relationships, the NALC aims to uncover more individuals called to serve.

One of Pastor Jeff Morlock’s key tactics is to engage potential candidates seeking a second career in ministry. These individuals, often married with children and full-time jobs, may be unable to commit to full-time seminary education. The North American Lutheran Seminary (NALS) Network provides a flexible path for them.

The NALS Network consists of the Seminary Center in Ambridge, Pennsylvania, as well as Houses of Study in Alabama, Alberta, California, Texas and South Dakota.

Additionally, Morlock has encountered numerous individuals from other religious traditions drawn to the essential aspects of the Lutheran tradition, such as the real presence of Christ in Holy Communion,

sacraments, Law-Gospel preaching and justification by grace through faith. The NALS is dedicated to equipping these individuals with a strong foundation for Lutheran ministry.

The innovative Ordination Under Special Circumstances (OUSC) program addresses the need for pastoral care in every NALC congregation.

Many smaller congregations, with 20 or 30 members, cannot afford a full-time pastor and may be geographically isolated. To tackle this challenge, the NALC screens retired or second-career individuals who have demonstrated leadership and preaching experience within their congregations. These candidates receive a tailored education, providing them with the theological and formational groundwork for effective vocational ministry.

Firmly committed to its 2020 Vision of providing pastoral care for all congregations across the continent, the NALC recognizes the OUSC program as an integral component of this mission.

Congregations facing unique challenges can greatly benefit from this inventive approach. The NALC is confident in its ability to cultivate 300 well-formed pastors over the next 10 years.

We express our gratitude to all those who support the endeavor to empower more pastors within the Church. The responsibility for fostering new pastors extends beyond the NALC staff and those directly involved in the pastoral development process. As a denomination, we must all contribute to this crucial mission.

“We need all of us. Be praying, be watching, be listening, be looking. And if God is calling you in any way, my encouragement would be to not ignore that call: to pursue it, to see truly if it is from the Lord, and if so, then we will do everything we can to help,” Bishop Dan Selbo said.

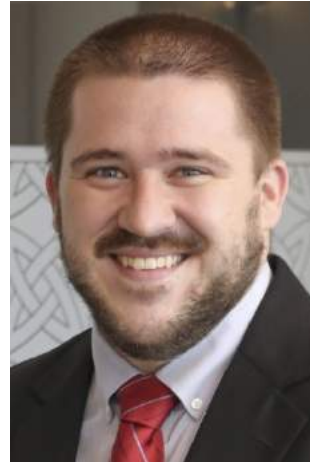
NALS SPECIAL EVENT PLANNED FOR MAY 3

The North American Lutheran Seminary (NALS) will host a special service marking a formal “affirmation of call” for the Rev. Dr. Eric M. Riesen as president of the NALS and the installation of Dr. David Luy and Dr. Alex Pierce as NALS professors.

The service is scheduled for 7 p.m. on Wednesday, May 3, at Zion Lutheran Church in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Bishop Dan Selbo will preach and preside at the installation.



David Luy



Alex Pierce



Eric Riesen

Dr. Riesen has been the seminary president since 2020, but he was never formally installed due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Dr. Luy and Dr. Pierce joined the seminary faculty in 2022. Both of them teach at the NALS Seminary Center at Trinity School for Ministry in Ambridge, Pennsylvania, and are faculty of Trinity.

The NALS Network consists of the Seminary Center as well as Houses of Study at Beeson Divinity School in Birmingham, Alabama; Concordia Lutheran Seminary in Edmonton, Alberta; Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, California, and Houston, Texas; and Sioux Falls Seminary (Kairos University) in Sioux Falls, South Dakota. For more information go to thenals.org.



NORTH AMERICAN
LUTHERAN
SEMINARY

THE PATRISTIC AND MEDIEVAL HORIZONS OF THE LUTHERAN REFORMATION

JUNE 12 – 16, 2023

NALS JUNE INTERTERM

What do Irenaeus of Lyons and the Gnostics, Augustine of Hippo and the Pelagians, and the writings of medieval mystics and scholastics have to do with the Lutheran Reformation?

In this year's NALS June InterTerm, Dr. David Luy and Dr. Alex Pierce will consider these and other related questions to reflect more deeply upon what it means for churches, pastors and theologians to be “Traditionally Grounded.” Seminarians, pastors and lay leaders are invited to join us as we think about this Core Value of the NALC.

Learn more and to register visit thenals.org/interterms

BEAUTIFUL FEET IN HAITI

By Pastor Heidi Punt

Come, walk with me. Take a step into a world so different from ours, so far removed from all the luxuries and customs of our culture that you may wonder how life can even exist in such harsh circumstances. Travel with me to a place where the words, spoken by the apostle Paul to his congregation in Rome centuries before, could not be more relevant now, than when they were first written: "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved."

You believe this don't you? Calling on the name of Jesus offers salvation. God graciously offers this to us. But imagine never having heard the name of Jesus spoken in love and grace. Instead you are shrouded with a spirituality invoking legions and demons belonging to Satan himself, punctuated by chaotic and intimidating practices of worship.

Paul continues in Romans 10:13-15, "How then can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can anyone preach unless they are sent?"

In 2019, the NALC sent me as a global worker to Haiti. For about 10 weeks a year (while also fulfilling my full-time call as pastor in North Carolina) I partnered with Sundouloi Ministries, Incorporated (SMI Haiti), and saw how God worked in the most powerful ways:

- + Veils were torn from women's eyes as they first heard about a God who loves them beyond measure.
- + Homes were opened to the Holy Spirit as the devil was expelled.
- + Children received Christian education.
- + Mothers saw the lives in their wombs as a gift from God instead of an excretion of the body.



- + Hungry bellies were filled with food and souls nurtured with grace.
- + Pastors were trained.
- + Churches, schools and clinics were built.
- + Young men and women are developing vocations.

On July 7, 2021, at 1 a.m., while I was safely sleeping in the mission house, the country was catapulted into chaos. The President was assassinated. Ever since then, it has become increasingly dangerous to enter the country, let alone to be a civilian trying to survive in these times. But all was not lost.

With or without our physical presence there, SMI Haiti continued and still is powerfully involved in fulfilling their calling to be "sundouls" (which means "fellow servants") of our Lord and Savior, taking the calling to preach so they can believe literally.

Continued on Page 9

Prayerful and financial support from various NALC congregations and individuals has allowed our pastors, teachers, nurses and other co-workers to be the beautiful feet of those who bring good news! Thank you.

During these tumultuous times in Haiti, a weekly online Bible and leadership training with the pastors has become a cornerstone. We have had Bishop Dan Selbo, Pastor Amy Little and Pastor Brad Hales partner with us in this too. These times still prove to be Spirit-driven. While it seems that language might be a barrier, it soon becomes clear that in Christ we are all unapologetically children of the one true God with the mission to be messengers of Christ.

Are you still walking with me?

Meet Pastor Alexandre from Nanwoch, who went into the small village of Maya, located in the mountains near Pierre Payne, with the sole purpose to share Jesus and encourage villagers with the Holy Word. He nourished their spirits while also providing them with some food for their bodies.

He returned to report: "Maya people thank you very much for the food. They were in need of an action like that. While I was teaching the Word of God, a Vodou priest arrived with little girls and said, 'Pastor, please give each child food because their mother is dead, they have nothing left to eat.' Then many people from Maya showed their gratitude. We bless the Lord for all the glory is to our God."

Thank you for giving, thank you for praying. Thank you for not forgetting the people and ministry in Haiti. Because of you, the young orphans found food as Jesus found them. They believe because they heard. They heard because Pastor Alexandre told them. "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!"

Take just one more step and meet Pastor Romelus from the Village of Kamitan, another one of our pastors with a passion and a heart for sharing the Gospel truth. He shares, "On Sunday afternoon we



went to a great service at Bodme Boulard where the people asked us to come and do a crusade. We were with them from 4 p.m. and we finished at 7 p.m.." For three solid hours Pastor Romelus and his lay leaders preached and people came to faith. "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!"

The love I have for this mission and the community of Christ that you have helped build, has been extraordinary. The sounds, smells, the little sticky hands and beautiful faces of Haiti may seem like a different world, but once you walk with them, it's just a Spirit's breath away. My heart continuously aches for the ones who are there every day fighting the spiritual and political warfare. My prayer and hope is that Haiti will soon be restored, and that we can physically return to walk alongside the "beautiful feet."

In the meantime, there are a some things we as brothers and sisters of Christ can do: Continue to pray hard and intentionally that the beautiful feet continue to preach faithfully and learn more about this mission at smihaiti.org.

They can't believe if they haven't heard and they can't hear if no one is preaching and no one will preach unless they are sent — walk with me.

Pastor Heidi Punt is an NALC global worker working with SMI Haiti, an NALC ministry partner. You can learn more about her work and partner with her at thenalc.org/partners/heidi-punt.

PREACHING PREDESTINATION WITH JIM NESTINGEN

By Pastor John W. Hoyum

Not long ago, a friend and mentor of mine died and went into his (very much unearned) reward with Jesus Christ. James A. Nestingen was known to many — in the Lutheran world and outside of it — for his bold testimony to Christ and the salvation He bestows. Jim was many things, above all, a family man. But his public vocation was that of preacher and teacher of the Church. His scholarship on the Reformation has shaped our understanding of the 16th century, and his personality was larger than life, leaving an impression on all he encountered.

There are many contributions of Jim's career that we should remember. But one worth noticing is Jim's understanding of preaching — what it is, what it does, and how we should do it. He was famous for telling his seminary students that if you stand in the pulpit, you must "hand over the goods." This inspired the title of a series of essays published in his honor. Jim's turn of phrase might seem folksy, but it reveals a significant insight about preaching. I want to say a bit about Jim's view of preaching as delivery of the comfort of God's predestination.

As Jim taught so well, preaching isn't just information about Christ, and as much as Jim loved telling stories, preaching isn't just a rehearsal of the story about Jesus. To preach is to deliver the gift of Christ — the story of His life serves this final move in a sermon to deliver predestination in the word preached. It's not enough to talk about Jesus and what He did. Preachers must give Christ to those in front of them.

By "sermon" and "preaching" I mean the formal, Sunday morning kind of sermon delivered in a pulpit and heard by churchgoers. But a sermon and a preacher aren't just that; they include the ordinary encounters of one Christian with another. The words exchanged from one believer to another



Jim Nestingen



John Hoyum

count as preaching, as long as Christ for you is the punchline.

For Jim, God's predestination doesn't mean He just makes a decision about us high above in eternity and then waits for us to figure out what it is. On the other hand, salvation isn't a matter of me deciding how I'm going to live my life or where I'm going to place my trust. Faith isn't something I can decide to do if I try hard enough. It's something that comes from the outside. And it's that thing on the outside — God's decision about my life — that creates faith. This decision is a word — a sermon — one sinner speaks to another. And the word in its shortest form is the promise of the Gospel: "I forgive you in the name of Jesus Christ."

A promise like this doesn't point sinners toward the mysterious decision of God hidden in His eternal glory. The promise of the Gospel is God's decision about you. God's decision is the word of forgiveness itself: "I baptize you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit," that's God's decision; "This is my body, given for you" and "This is my blood, shed for you" — also God's decision.

Continued on Page 11

You can't get outside it. Because we are unwilling preachers, theology is designed to make us say just these words. Like in the first creation, the words Christ gives make something new: a new creation, for now hidden from sight.

Lutherans didn't always recognize the power of God's word and didn't always recognize that the word of forgiveness is God's decision about sinners. After the Reformation, many Lutherans feared that Luther's strong language about predestination, especially in *The Bondage of the Will* (1525), would make it difficult to refute the Reformed and Calvinist teaching of double predestination — that God determines two groups of human beings: those destined for salvation and those destined for damnation.

In reaction, after the Formula of Concord (1577), virtually all the theologians of later Lutheran scholasticism abandoned Luther's teaching on predestination. Because they misunderstood Luther's teaching, they invented a doctrine of "foreseen faith" (*intuitu fidei*), by which God "elects" people based on His knowledge that they will hear and believe the Gospel. Luther taught that God makes known His decision about us through the message of the Gospel, but the doctrine that developed in later Lutheranism emphasized faith as a free act of human beings that God only "foreknows." Despite their attempts to explain this in a comforting way, many Lutherans, after the Reformation, grounded Christian assurance in the act of believing instead of the word of forgiveness given in the Gospel and the Sacraments.

The original teaching of Luther on predestination didn't reemerge until European immigrants boarded ships to go to America in the 1800s. The questions and concerns of a new cultural environment led these Lutherans to reconsider predestination, and they found the explanation of the Lutheran scholastics useless.

And so a controversy arose in the Missouri Synod and its close associate, the Norwegian Synod, about predestination. C.F.W. Walther of the Missouri Synod and theologians of the Norwegian Synod, like U.V. Koren, sought to recover the original Lutheran

view of predestination. By rereading Luther and the Formula of Concord, they came to understand that predestination isn't about God's secret will, nor is it about human freedom to choose grace over sin. Predestination is about God's decision for you in the here and now. And so they learned that predestination is about God's Word — otherwise, how else would we know what God is doing?

It's from this brand of Lutheranism — the Norwegian Synod and the allies of Walther — that we receive Jim Nestingen's teaching on preaching and predestination. He didn't just make it up but learned it from his teachers at Luther Seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota, like Gerhard Forde and Herman Preus. In his own ministry as a pastor and professor, he put it into practice by handing over the goods, as he liked to say. Jim and his teachers understood that predestination isn't an abstraction — as if we have to go hunting for the answer to whether I'm saved or not.

Instead, predestination is a revelation of God's choice for you in the promise preached. Predestination, Jim knew, is no longer a frightening doctrine of mystery when you understand that God makes His choice about you in the simple word of God, given from one sinner to another. If you want to know if you're elect — if you're among the chosen of God — just find another Christian to speak this simple message to you once again. You belong to Christ, and nothing can change that.

Jim taught so well by using stories. I have a war chest of them that I draw on all the time as I preach and teach the Gospel in my own ministry. And his personality was attractive to many, but it was the clarity with which he proclaimed God's decision that kept people coming back for more. Predestination is God's decision about you, and it can't be changed. Neither feeling nor faithfulness overpowers God's promise. And having this word of forgiveness means you have everything. Nothing hides behind it. God's word of forgiveness is His decision about your life. It's your predestination and election — no terms and conditions! And now that you have it, there's nothing left to do. Now, you're free.

The Rev. Dr. John Hoyum serves as pastor of Denny Park Lutheran Church in Seattle, Washington. This article is reprinted from 1517.org.

FAITHFUL WORSHIP AND SPIRITUAL AWAKENING

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. — 1 Peter 1:3

I have recently been reading the book, *A Shepherd's Letter*, by Bishop Bo Giertz (1905-1998) of the Lutheran diocese of Gothenburg, Sweden, which he served from 1949 to 1970.

He wrote his letter to the pastors and people of his diocese regarding what he understood to be the challenges and the call to Lutherans in that land in that day. What he wrote resonates with our church life and cultural context today.

They faced pressures and persecution, even then, from the increasingly secular forces in western civilization. Unfortunately, the church in Sweden was ill-prepared to respond, as Lutherans were, by and large, asleep at the wheel. In Bishop Giertz's view, the church's worship was often cold and lifeless, formal and rote. At the same time, there was little commitment or energy evidenced in pastors and congregations, hardly more than a dying ember. In response, his shepherd's letter was aimed at two strategies for renewal. He called for a renewed commitment to the liturgy of the Church, together with spiritual awakening.

In a passage worth quoting, in spite of the length, Bishop Giertz wrote:

Liturgy and awakening have often come to stand in opposition to each other. It was not so in the earliest church and ought not be so today either. They are the work of the same Spirit, parts of the same inheritance. They both have the right to be there. ... Spiritual awakening and liturgy partially speak different languages, and so they must. The instrument of awakening is the spoken Word, a Word with prophetic



MINISTRY MATTERS

REV. DR. DAVID WENDEL
ASSISTANT TO THE BISHOP
FOR MINISTRY AND ECUMENISM

authority, powerful enough to crush the heart's hard stone and at the same time appeal with the Gospel's complete sincerity. ... God seeks the perishing and the lost. The Word grasps after he who is not at home in God's courts. ... It speaks to children of the age in the language of the things that they have forgotten but need to hear. ... It is different with the liturgy. Its instrument is also the Word, but as it pours out from the deepest springs. The liturgy "imparts wisdom among the mature" (1 Corinthians 6:2). It makes use of all the wealth of Scripture, all the content-saturated symbols and the hidden foreshadowing of Christ in the Old Testament. ... It listens to the prophets and dives into the Gospel's deepest mysteries. For just this reason the liturgy constantly turns back to the same holy forms, it even dares to use the hidden wisdom of Scripture. So it also loves a music that contains inexhaustible depth of humble worship and expectant joy behind its apparent simplicity. It loves to lift hearts to God with the kyrie's guarded tones or the preface's dignified joy.

Giertz concludes:

Now this means that we give both awakening and liturgy their rightful, early Christian places in congregational life. We always need awakening, not only because the church must always be a missionary church reaching out to those who stand outside, but also because the church's most faithful members also need awakening. Every old Adam is similarly inclined to

Continued on Page 13

doze off, to turn the Christian life into a dead routine, to use the forms of the liturgy as a means to cocoon oneself in complacency and unrepentance. ... The Holy Spirit always needs to awaken slumbering souls, stir up the dust, send the old Adam packing, and breathe new life into dead bones.



Fresh Eyes for Mission Summit at St. Jacob's Lutheran Church in Chapin, South Carolina.

Why this extended introduction to Bishop Giertz's letter? Because in the North American Lutheran Church, in the Lutheran Church in the West, and, yes, in our congregations, there is a real and obvious need for renewal which comes from liturgy — the church's faithful worship and spiritual awakening.

Clearly, many of us in North American Lutheranism were flying on auto-pilot until 2009 when many woke up, if ever so briefly, to take a stand for the truth and authority of God's Word. It was a time of confession and conviction, with energy and vigor as the North American Lutheran Church was formed as a Christ-Centered, Mission-Driven, Traditionally-Grounded, Congregationally-Focused denomination that we understood as a continuation of what was best about our Lutheran-Christian movement.

However, before the pandemic, congregations were seeing decline in attendance, plateaued membership, inability to reach out and engage with "the perishing and the lost," content in our own pews, within the four walls of our church buildings.

It's for these reasons that we have been offering opportunities for renewal in the NALC — with Life-to-Life Discipleship, with renewal courses, and now, with the Fresh Eyes for Mission Summits. Every congregation which has participated in a Fresh Eyes Summit has experienced mission and ministry with "fresh eyes," renewed energy and excitement.

The process supports and encourages faithfulness and commitment in worship, but also awakening, as the Holy Spirit stirs hearts and minds and lives, as congregations and pastors and members are born anew — to new life and new hope for the future — through the resurrection of Christ from the dead.

As I have follow-up conversations with congregations which have participated in Fresh Eyes for Mission Summits, my final question is: "How have the vision points developed during the summit continued to motivate and shape your mission and ministry six to nine months after the summit?" On a scale of 1-10, with 10 being the highest rating, congregations have averaged 7.8 in continued energy, enthusiasm and focus on the renewed vision.

The summits are first and foremost, an awakening — an awakening to the incarnate presence of Jesus Christ in our midst, in the Means of Grace; an awakening to the meaning and mystery of Jesus' real presence in Word and Sacrament; an awakening to the reality of the unchurched and unaffiliated in our communities and missional contexts — together with an awareness that the perishing and the lost will not be reached if we remain within the four walls of our church buildings, unwilling to share the hope that is in us; and an awakening to what it means to be living members of the Body of Christ, which is a community of disciples of Jesus, rather than organizational members of the institutional "Church, Inc."

Join me in prayer for a renewed commitment in the NALC and each of our congregations, to faithful worship within our Lutheran tradition, together with spiritual awakening that energizes and inspires us to greater mission and ministry for the sake of the world.

Pastor David Wendel is assistant to the bishop for ministry and ecumenism. You may contact Pastor Wendel at dwendel@thenalc.org.

IT ONLY TAKES A SPARK

A decades-long partnership between Joy Lutheran Church in Richmond, Texas, and ministries in Mexico started with a simple conversation.

Back in the 1990s, the son of a Joy member living in McAllen, Texas, mentioned that the Rev. Bezaleel Hernandez, pastor of Iglesia Luterana Cristo Rey in Pharr, Texas, had started a new church by the same name in Reynosa, Mexico.

Cristo Rey needed help. Joy's members responded by voting to send a percentage of their weekly general offerings to the new church. Then, from 2000 to 2009, they also sent mission trips to conduct Vacation Bible School for the children of Cristo Rey.

It was on that first mission trip when the group met Big Heart Orphanage in Reynosa and its founder, Gator Carter. Cristo Rey lacked accommodations for Joy's group but arranged to have them housed at Big Heart for a modest fee. The group conducted VBS at Cristo Rey in the mornings and spent time with children at the orphanage in the afternoons.

Their stay at Big Heart each year culminated with a short VBS for the orphans. Given the increasingly volatile situation at the border, Joy discontinued



Big Heart Orphanage in Reynosa, Mexico

their annual mission trips to Cristo Rey after 2009. They had, thankfully, witnessed Cristo Rey-Reynosa become well established and supported by other congregations.

The members of Joy had also witnessed the wonderful ministry at Big Heart Orphanage. They decided to shift their mission support to Big Heart. To this day, they continue to send a percentage of their weekly offering to support the work of the Carters at Big Heart Orphanage.

They also periodically gather and send school supplies and have twice sent mission trips to assist the orphanage. The members of Joy maintain a strong personal relationship with Carter, who even traveled to speak at Joy's multigenerational VBS.

Described as a larger-than-life personality, Carter and his family have dedicated their lives to helping children who have no family. In 1989, after feeling a strong calling from God, Gator and his wife, Deanna, moved from Houston to Mexico to work with Deanna's parents who founded an orphanage many years earlier. They worked at the orphanage for nearly five years. It was difficult learning the language, culture and how to live a different way of life.



Continued on Page 15

DISASTER RESPONSE MISSION TRIPS

NALC Disaster Response is scheduling mission trips for congregations and individuals to provide long term recovery, repair and rebuilding of homes damaged or destroyed by recent disasters.

Eastern Kentucky had flash flooding which caused over 25,000 families to lose their homes. A total of 37 people died in this disaster. NALC Disaster Response is partnering with a local congregation to provide housing for mission teams who will assist in the rebuilding of homes in the Chavies-Hazard, Kentucky, area.

We are also responding to Hurricane Ian in Florida, scheduling mission teams for the Pine Island and Port Charlotte area.

California has been impacted by flooding, mud slides and wildfires. We have scheduled a mission trip to New Hope Lutheran Church in Foresthill, California, to help families there rebuild.

For more information or to schedule a trip, contact Mary Bates, NALC Disaster Response coordinator, at disasterresponse@thenalc.org or 740-509-1132.

IT ONLY TAKES A SPARK

Continued from Page 14

They left that orphanage for two years but then felt a calling to return to Mexico. They started Big Heart Orphanage in Reynosa. They also founded the Regents School. Originally intended for only the orphanage, pastors' children and a few others, it now serves more than 500 students from the community.

After being at Big Heart Orphanage for more than 18 years, Gator and Deanna were gifted a small orphanage of eight children in the mountains in Ramos Azripe, 11 miles from Saltillo in the Mexican state of Coahuila.

Again, feeling a strong calling from God, in 2018 Gator and Deanna left Big Heart Orphanage in the hands of their son, Micah, and moved to Big Heart in the Mountains. There is much work to be done there. The orphanage is in one house. Plans are to build separate girls' and boys' dormitories and a kitchen. There is a satellite version of the Regents School for children at the orphanage, with plans to build a Regents School complex for the whole community. There is much work to be done and much outside support needed.

All it took to set off Joy Lutheran Church's 20-plus-year relationship with Big Heart was one person telling another about a need they saw, and that person choosing to answer the call to mission by spreading the word. It only takes a spark.

Reprinted from the NALC Texas Mission Region Missions newsletter.

BISHOP'S MESSAGE

Continued from Page 3

Because if it's true, then it's true, and what that means is that the Son of God, the person of Jesus Christ, the one who created you and gave you life, and who now calls you to be His follower, gave His life on the cross and was raised from the dead so that you could have yours.

But don't base your belief on public opinion or personal desire or the latest social media post. Base your belief on what really happened, on what God has told us about Himself in His Word, what He's done and accomplished in Jesus Christ on the cross, and upon what's really true.

If Easter means anything, it means everything. There is no middle ground. It's "All or Nothing" with Jesus.

NALC YOUTH GATHERING

An NALC Continental Youth Gathering will be held July 1-4, 2024, in Boerne, Texas (near San Antonio).

Who can attend?

Youth Ages 12-18 can attend as youth participants. Young adults ages 19-24 can attend as Leaders in Training.

Adults 25 and older can attend as Team Leaders (one leader for a maximum of seven youth).

What is the NALC Continental Youth Gathering?

It is a four-day gathering that provides opportunities for NALC youth to grow in faith and relationship with others as the body of Christ. It is a time to worship together, study God's Word, be equipped through large and small group sessions, reach out to



WE BELONG
"I KNOW MY OWN AND MY OWN KNOW ME"

the community through mission events, and engage in fellowship and fun.

Why are we having this gathering?

Because we belong! We belong to Christ. We belong to the Church. We belong to the community. We belong to each other. We belong!

For more information go to thenalc.org/cyg.

FAITH FORMATION FESTIVAL IN OHIO

A Faith Formation Festival will be held on Friday, May 5, at Grace Evangelical Lutheran Church in Westerville, Ohio.

This event will precede the Ohio Mission Region and Heartland Mission District Convocation on Saturday, May 6.

Speakers will address topics like: Raising God's Children to be Disciples in a Broken World; Youth and Suicide; Walking with Youth: Gender Dysphoria; We have no kids. How do we do youth, children, and family ministry?; and much more.



To register or for more information go to thenalc.org/faith-formation-festivals.

LET'S KEEP IN TOUCH

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