

NALC News

North American Lutheran Church

January 2015

2015 NALC Pastors Conference *'Jesus and the Bible: Authority in the Church'*

"Jesus and the Bible: Authority in the Church" is the theme of the 2015 NALC Pastors Conference Feb. 10-12, at the Crowne Plaza Orlando Universal in Orlando, Fla.

Dr. David Yeago will offer two keynote presentations on the conference theme. Dr. Yeago is professor of Systematic Theology and Ethics for the North American Lutheran Seminary and Trinity School for Ministry in Ambridge, Pa.



David Yeago

The Rev. Dr. James Nestingen will lead two presentations on preaching lectionary Scripture texts for Lent, Holy Week, and Easter. These will be followed by preaching workshops where pastors are invited to deliver sermons on Scripture texts from Lent, Holy Week, and Easter and to receive feedback from presenters and colleagues.

Dr. Nestingen is professor emeritus in Church History at Luther Seminary in St. Paul, Minn. He also teaches for the North American Lutheran Seminary.

Workshop opportunities will be offered on Tuesday and Wednesday evenings. Workshops include:

+ "The NALC Discipleship Emphasis and You" - Bishop John Bradosky and Pastor Mark Chavez, General Secretary.



James Nestingen



Amy Schifrin

+ "Worship in the NALC" - the Rev. Dr. Amy Schifrin, president of the North American Lutheran Seminary, and Associate Professor of Liturgy and Homiletics at Trinity School for Ministry.

+ "Reigniting Passion for Mission in the NALC" - Pastor Gemechis Buba, Assistant to the Bishop for Missions.

Thursday will feature a meeting of the NALC Ministerium, chaired by Bishop Bradosky, followed by a service of Holy Communion including the renewal of ordination vows and a blessing of oil for use in local congregations.

There will be free time each afternoon with the opportunity to schedule individual time with the bishop or other NALC executive staff.

Registration fee is \$75. You may register online at www.thenalc.org.

Why an NALC Pastors Conference?

At this time, we are a little less than one month away from the annual NALC Pastors Conference Feb. 10-12 in Orlando, Fla. Being honest, I would have to say we are a little surprised that more NALC pastors are not registered! A special email was sent to NALC clergy recently, with a cover letter from Bishop Bradosky. Still, it seems useful to answer the question pastors and NALC members may be asking — why is there an NALC Pastors Conference?

In November, I wrote about the value of a true ministerium within the church, and the benefits such a gathering provides for both pastors and congregations. What was not mentioned in that Ministry Matters article is the issue of “accountability” for our clergy.

The two keynote addresses at the conference will focus on “Jesus, the Bible and Authority in the Church,” by Dr. David Yeago. But the truth is that authority is closely related to accountability. Surely the addresses at the conference will acknowledge the connection between the two, because having authority in the Body of Christ means little if there is not also accountability.

If Jesus Christ is Lord of the Church, His authority (Jesus says, “All authority in heaven and on earth have been given to me.” Matthew 28:18) over His body implies/requires accountability — for His followers/disciples, but even more, for those He calls into ordained public ministry.

That authority in the Church on earth is exercised through individuals by “overseers” — bishops who are called by Christ to shepherd the flock, pastor the pastors, and yes, hold them accountable. The bishop is also accountable to the Lord of the Church, as God’s will is revealed through His Word.

This is why bishops in the Church may not/should not depart from or preach and teach contrary to Holy Scripture. Properly in the Church, faithful bishops will not bend to the winds of change in the culture, will not change Biblical teaching to suit modern tastes and preferences, will not shape the Church to reflect the world.



Ministry Matters

Pastor David Wendel

Assistant to the Bishop
for Ministry and Ecumenism

The bishop is accountable to Christ and God’s Word, and the bishop holds pastors accountable to these as well. We all know how the Body of Christ is divided and thrown into turmoil when bishops are not accountable to God’s Word and place their own agendas over Christ’s!

A regular gathering of our bishop and pastors, then, is essential to both authority and accountability. Bishop and pastors need time to hear and study God’s Word together. They need time to consider what it means to be accountable to Jesus and God’s Word.

We need to meet together to hold one another accountable to our vows of ordination, addressing areas that need improvement, seeking to better ourselves as pastors, preachers and teachers, who continue to be “formed” as the faithful NALC pastors we wish to be.

This is why the NALC Pastors Conference is many-faceted. There will be Biblical, theological and Confessional teaching. There will be worship and prayer. There will be encouragement and practical instruction in preaching. There will be workshops on mission, discipleship and worship. There will be time for pastors to meet individually with the bishop and his staff. There will be a time for intentional conversation as the ministerium of the NALC.

Finally, the bishop will lead our pastors in a renewal of our vows of ordination. This will be at the heart of our accountability to the Lord Jesus, God’s Word and His Church. An NALC pastor who will not participate in this annual conference will miss a great deal!

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NALC partners with Liberian bishop in fight against Ebola

The North American Lutheran Church is partnering with the Rev. Sumoward E. Harris, bishop emeritus of the Lutheran Church in Liberia, in responding to the Ebola crisis in that country. Bishop Harris was asked to share some of his experiences with the crisis and the needs in the country.

Gifts to support his ministry may given through the NALC. Please send checks to 2299 Palmer Drive, Suite 220; New Brighton, MN 55112-2202. Please note "Ebola virus" on your check.

The Ebola virus entered Liberia through the northern town of Foya in Lofa County from the Republic of Guinea in March of 2014. It has spread throughout all the 15 counties of Liberia killing over 3,000 people including nurses, doctors and other health workers.

I got involved in the fight against the Ebola virus in June through visitation, conducting awareness meetings and workshops, presenting printed materials, and providing buckets with towels and disinfectants.

The activities are dangerous to our health and safety in areas where transportation by cars is very difficult and sometimes just impossible. I rode motorbike for four days at a time climbing very steep hills. I also walked one week in dense forest, going through swamps and creeks without bridges. My jeep broke down on four different occasions. Each of the breakdowns was very costly. Two breakdowns were due to the burning of the engine that required buying a new engine at a cost of \$3,500 (U.S.).

The last breakdown in early November in the middle of an un-bridged river was from damage to the gear box, which cost \$1,600 to repair. Up to the writing of this article, the jeep is still in the garage with an additional request from the mechanic to replace the engine seat.



Sumoward E. Harris

With the lack of transportation, our task of going out is becoming very difficult if not impossible. As the places where we are working with affected people are very remote in rural Liberia and the roads very deplorable in Gbarpolu and Grand Cape Mount Counties, commercial cars cannot go to those places at the regular fare. We are left

with the options of riding chartered commercial vehicles or motorbikes with payment of an exorbitant fare.

We have given the above background and the difficult challenges we face to highlight the urgency of the need and how support from NALC congregations will definitely make an immediate difference in the healing of the infected and affected and the prevent the spread of the Ebola virus.

In November, the level of infection and death from Ebola was declining but by December it began to rise again. The reasons are the following:

1. Lack of knowledge about the virus and its mode of transmission as well as prevention methods.
2. Entrenched traditional cultural and religious practices such as: eating together from the same bowl with the same spoons, drinking from the same buckets and cups, bathing together in the same bathing buckets, and bathing, dressing, and plaiting the hair of the dead person.
3. Denial of the existence of the virus and attributing the virus to the cause of witches.

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4. Cross-border visitation by people from the three affected countries: Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone. The borders between the three countries are very wide so people move back and forth on a daily basis visiting their relatives and neighbors.

These are some of the causes of the upsurge in the spread of Ebola particularly in Grand Cape Mount, Montserrado and Nimba Counties. But with the financial and moral support of the wonderful congregations of NALC to the Ebola Response Project, I have the conviction that we shall do everything possible to eradicate the Ebola virus from Liberia.

With your financial support, we shall redouble our efforts in the remotest rural places where we have been working before.

Your support will help us shine the light on the Ebola virus. The need is urgent indeed, and any immediate support from you makes a profound difference in the healing of the infected and

affected people as well in preventing the spread of the Ebola virus. Please also pray for us.

May God help the work of the leadership and members of the North American Lutheran Church.

Ministry Matters

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Certainly, some will not be able to attend for valid reasons. We pray that no pastor will miss this conference because they were unaware, uninterested, or just didn't bother to get registered! Pastors who have not yet registered — do it now!

The conference will begin Tuesday, Feb. 10, at 8:30 a.m. at the Crowne Plaza Orlando Universal. It will end Thursday, Feb. 12 at noon. Pastors are encouraged to bring their spouses, if they wish, so that spouses may benefit from the presentations, prayer and worship.

Go to www.thenalc.org where you will find a link to registration on the front page of the website.



IMPACT

National Youth Event | June 25–28, 2015 | Chicago, IL
Featuring: Pastor Bill Yonker, Bread of Stone, and more!

Partnering with Christian communities to strengthen their youth ministry.

Youth
ENCOUNTER

Congregation responds to Ebola

By Pastor Christopher Byars

St. John's Evangelical Lutheran Church in Lake Township on the outskirts of Fort Wayne, Ind., has always had a heart for mission.

The congregation has organized two mission trips to Tanzania and is planning a third. Because of connections to Africa, members wanted to respond to the Ebola crisis in western Africa.

Having built an infectious disease ward in a hospital in Tanzania and worked with another to install a generator and an x-ray machine, we knew that in the best of times the health system in African nations is fragile. Because the health system in western Africa is poorer than in Tanzania, members of St. John's knew the situation was dire.

A committee was formed for St. John's Ebola response. It began with the exploring of options and seeking out partners in the community.

In the process we were directed to Direct Relief through one of the mission partners we had worked with in Tanzania. Direct Relief directs 100 percent of the gifts given to the area to which it is directed. Administrative costs are raised through other means. For that reason we saw them as a great mission partner for this purpose, since they also had the contacts in western Africa and had already begun sending supplies.

Our hope was to get the word out. News outlets were contacted and dates were set to do the congregational launch. Oct. 12 was the beginning with our youth dressed in protective garb to represent what we were supporting. The main collection was on Oct. 19 with youth donning the same gear and collecting the gifts.



Members of St. John's Evangelical Lutheran Church donned protective gear to raise funds to help respond to the Ebola outbreak in Africa.

Joe Boway, a Liberian in the Fort Wayne area, spoke to the congregation to help them understand the needs of his homeland.

This led to coverage of our work by local newspapers and TV stations.

The goal is to raise awareness and funds to purchase and send the necessary protective gear to western Africa. St. John's fundraising goal is \$50,000. If you'd like to partner with us please click on the link at www.stjohnslaketownship.org. We hope that more NALC and Lutheran CORE congregations would join with us because the impact that we can have together will help us all in the future.

I have met with city leaders as we attempt to organize something bigger within the community. Awareness is key since Ebola, though not on the front pages, is still affecting our brothers and sisters in Christ in western Africa. For more information about the partner we are utilizing to deliver materials to Africa, please go to directrelief.org.

A Call to Solidarity with Congo

For the past two years, a three-year old mission congregation, Reformation Lutheran Church in New Bern, N.C., has reached out to Lutherans in the Democratic Republic of Congo by offering time, financial support and prayers for their pastor, the Rev. Stéphane Kalonji, to travel to Africa for mission work.

Besides the support he receives from his congregation, Pastor Kalonji has also sought and received additional support from the NALC's Missions Office, and from congregations and individuals. The support he receives from these sources makes it possible for him to take a three-week mission trip every year.

When in Congo, Pastor Kalonji travels locally and conducts seminars on missional leadership, small group-ministry and church planting for pastors, seminarians and lay leaders. He also makes presentations on Christian forgiveness and reconciliation in a country that has suffered more than 15 years of war.

Bishop Keya of the "Communauté des Eglises Luthériennes Confessionnelles au Congo" (Community of the Confessional Lutheran Churches of Congo) has been very appreciative of the leadership training. He says that the yearly training enables the church to become more effective in its services to God and to His people.

Besides the effort to train its leaders, the Lutheran church in Congo also seeks to answer to the physical needs of the people it serves. The more-than-a-decade-long war that took place in Congo has left many children orphaned and infected with HIV/AIDS.



Reformation Lutheran Church annually sends monetary gifts to provide food to more than 400 children fed by the Lutheran Church in Congo.

In order to create a sustainable source of food to feed these children and meet some of the church's needs, the Lutheran Church in Congo has initiated a farming project on 55 acres of land it has acquired in the coastal region of the country. The church needs \$25,000 for this farming project which has been endorsed by the NALC and is listed on the NALC's website at thenalc.org/gcs-in-africa/.



Stéphane Kalonji

Would you partner with Lutherans in Congo to make their farming project a reality? Check out the information online or contact Pastor Kalonji at 252-633-3711

NALC Mission Summit plans for 2015

Grace and peace to you in the Name of Jesus Christ!

We have just completed our 2015 Mission Summit held in Fayetteville, Ga., with Prince of Peace Lutheran Church and Pastor Justin Kollmeyer serving as our gracious host. It was a great blessing to have a national meeting 10 minutes away from my home.

The primary goal of our national mission teams is supporting, equipping, and resourcing congregations to accomplish the Great Commission. We gathered together with the Great Commission Society (GCS), International, Renewal, and New Starts teams for a time of visioning, brainstorming, and planning.

There are four main goals that the NALC missions office will be working to facilitate:

1. Continued development of the Mission Festival as a training resource for Mission Districts and congregations. The 2015 Mission Festival will be held Nov. 5-7 at Upper Arlington Lutheran Church in Hilliard, Ohio, with the main theme focusing on the relationship between discipleship and mission. Registration for this event will open on June 1.

This year will be one of preparation and growth as we look forward to 2016 when the Mission Festival will move to the week that the NALC Convocation and theological conference are held. It will be a



NALC Missions Summit in Fayetteville, Ga.



Missions Update

Pastor Gemechis Buba

Assistant to the Bishop for Missions

week designed and planned together to maximize the training of our leaders.

2. Continued development of Mission District Mission Teams to help congregations engage in the Great Commission by: discipling faith communities grounded in the Lutheran tradition; developing relationships with local, domestic, and global partners; planting churches and new mission starts.

3. Launch of the NALC Congregational Mission Team Project. The goal is to have a vibrant and active mission team in every congregation. A task force is already formulating the template and team job description for congregational mission teams.

4. Resource the Great Commission Society Team. There are many facets of the Great Commission Society. They are working to develop transitional and emergency aid through membership. They have also developed a vetting team so that as congregations and individuals look to partner with different missions they can be assured of the mission's legitimacy and fiscal responsibility. If you would like to connect or like to be listed, please visit: www.thenalc.org/great-commission-society.

The primary focus of the Great Commission Society is developing an *active* strategy to connect each NALC congregation in *relationships* with local, domestic and global missions. Please watch for training resources, updates and information as this initiative moves forward.

In addition to these main goals, our mission teams are working very diligently to provide for the needs and resources of congregations as they are being requested.

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NALC mission leaders pose for a group photo while at the NALC Mission Summit.

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The **International Mission Team** will be focusing on developing a strategy for encouraging more full-time missionaries. They will also be working with Theologians Without Borders to share our resources (our pastors and lay leaders) around the world where people are desperate for teaching and instruction. For more information please visit www.thenalc.org/theologians-without-borders.

Our **Renewal Team** will be working with NALC staff and the NALC Executive Council to advance the goal of each professional leader in the NALC to being in a coaching relationship. They will continue to develop a resource bank of teachers, preachers, and experts who can be deployed to congregations and Mission Districts to teach on specific topics as well as be devoted to caring for the souls and needs of our pastors by being a resource to the Pastors Conference and Pastor David Wendel in any way possible.

Our **New Starts Team** will be following up with those in attendance at the 2014 Mission Festival to provide resources as detailed in the participants' action plans. They will also be looking to partner with Life Together Churches in offering additional consultation, resources and training opportunities to our leaders and congregations in order to equip our leaders and churches with our house church planting project.

The "Missions" tab on the NALC website is a great tool to connect with the vast amount of resources that are available and for ongoing updates.

Thank you to the pastors, leaders, volunteers and congregations who give so selflessly of their time and themselves as we move forward together in the Great Commission as a Christ-Centered, Mission-Driven, Traditionally-Grounded, and Congregationally-Focused church.

Missionary Trail trip to China

This coming May, you are invited to travel to China as part of a Missionary Trail Trip! The tour is hosted by China Service Ventures, a ministry partner of the NALC.

Accompanied by knowledgeable guides from China Service Ventures, you will become acquainted with important aspects of missionary history and see and experience CSV's current work in China.

Participants will visit famous Chinese landmarks such as the Great Wall of China and also enjoy a Yangtze River Cruise through the Three Gorges.

The group will also travel to areas in which early Lutheran missionaries served and visit ongoing projects that are the result of these missionaries' labors.

The guides for the trip will be Dr. Tom Stertz, President of China Service Ventures, and Dr. Yaning Xu, China Relations Coordinator for CSV. They bring with them a wealth of knowledge and experience in Chinese missions and travel.

The dates of the trip are May 6-22. For more details about the trip, including a brochure, costs, and detailed itinerary, please contact Tom Stertz at tstertz@chinaserviceventures.org.

Learn more about CSV and their work at www.chinaserviceventures.org

Reflections on Epiphany 2015

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

The season of Epiphany provides us with Scripture texts that illuminate the truth of the nature and identity of the One born in Bethlehem. The season begins with the journey of the Magi following the light of the star. They are led to Christ and worship Him.

The texts then turn to the beginning of Jesus' public ministry, focusing our attention on the ministry of John the Baptist, the Baptism of Jesus, and John's pointing to Jesus as the long-awaited Messiah.

Both the message of John and the initial proclamation of Jesus are focused on the nature of Baptism and the reality of the Kingdom that has broken into our world through the incarnation of Jesus.

Both John's message and the Gospel Jesus proclaims begin with commands: "repent," "believe," "the Kingdom of God is at hand." Both begin with an understanding of our nature and being. We are sinners in need of forgiveness and repentance — the grace only Christ can provide.

These words seem foreign in our culture. Yet they take us to the heart of the matter regarding Christ's mission and our condition. What do we do with sin?

In the 1970s Dr. Karl Menninger, a clinical psychologist, wrote *Whatever Became of Sin?*, a book that I read and keep in my library. He asserts that sin is an unpopular subject in a culture that tolerates most every behavior under the guise of "privacy." This is a trick of Satan that has grasped the whole culture under the premise that "it's not my fault." People who are saturated by issues of privacy have a hard time admitting that there is evil in this world. "If it only affects me, then it can't be sin."

Dr. Menninger claims that we have converted sin to crime and then into symptoms of much deeper problems. Then we turned sin into illness and disease, and then into societal irresponsibility, "it's just the way the world is." Yet Menninger contends that the reality of sin is inescapable.



From the Bishop

Bishop John Bradosky

One of the cultural battles of our time revolves around attempts to avoid dealing with the reality of sin in our lives and in our world. We are the recipients of a 19th century optimism that has taught us to believe that human nature is fundamentally good and that the concept of evil is a matter of ignorance and low self worth. We believe that education, social reform and technology could create the great society and solve all the problems that concern us. We think the answer to everything is within us.

Jesus did not teach the fundamental goodness of human nature. He taught that we were made in the image of God but that our nature is "fallen" and corrupted. In His conversations with the refined, righteous and religious Pharisees, He noted that human nature is self centered and evil. Jesus summarized the moral imperative of God when He explained the Law in terms of love for God and love for neighbor.

Every sin or act of disobedience is selfish revolt against God's authority and our neighbor's welfare. Sin is simply hard-core selfishness. We are all guilty. The Scriptures remind us of this inescapable reality that all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. John writes, "If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us" and "we call God a liar" (1 John 1:8, 10).

The same light that exposes the truth of the nature of Jesus exposes our condition and deepest need.

That revelation reminds me of a profound story I read several years ago:

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In 1960, Israeli undercover agents orchestrated the daring kidnapping of Adolf Eichmann, one of the worst of the Holocaust's masterminds. After capturing him in his South American hideout, they transported him to Israel to stand trial. There, prosecutors called a string of former concentration camp prisoners as witnesses. One was a small haggard man named Yehiel Dinur, who had miraculously escaped death in Auschwitz. On his day to testify, Dinur entered the courtroom and stared at the man in the bulletproof glass booth — the man who had murdered Dinur's friends, personally executed a number of Jews, and presided over the slaughter of millions more. As the eyes of the two men met — victim and murderous tyrant — the courtroom fell silent, filled with the tension of the confrontation. But no one was prepared for what happened next. Yehiel Dinur began to shout and sob, collapsing to the floor. Was he overcome by hatred? By the horrifying memories? By the evil incarnate in Eichmann's face? No. As he later explained in a riveting "60 Minutes" interview, it was because Eichmann was not the demonic personification of evil that Dinur had expected. Rather, he was an ordinary man, just like anyone else. And in that one instant, Dinur came to a stunning realization that sin and evil are the human condition. "I was afraid about myself," Dinur said. "I saw that I am capable of doing this ... exactly like he."

Dinur's remarkable statements caused Mike Wallace to turn to the camera and ask the audience the most painful of all questions: "How was it possible for a man to act as Eichmann acted? Was he a monster? A madman? Or was he perhaps something even more terrifying? Was he normal? Yehiel Dinur's shocking conclusion? Eichmann is in all of us."

The need for repentance, confession and forgiveness has never been greater. That is why confessing our sins is a critical part of what we do in worship.

One of our pastors recently asked if I thought private confession and forgiveness should be encouraged in the process of discipling others. Not only does it have a place in that relationship, but I believe it should be utilized in counseling, healing

services, hospital calls and a variety of other pastoral contexts. The greater question is why is it used so seldom among us? Not only has our culture changed its understanding of sin and evil, but those changes have influenced our theology and practice.

Several years ago I traced those changes by looking at how our liturgical order for confession and forgiveness has changed over the past 75 years. Here are some excerpts from our worship many years ago:

I ask you upon bended knee to confess your sins before God and pray for forgiveness for Christ's sake. We poor sinners confess unto thee, O God, our heavenly Father, that we have grievously and in various ways, sinned against thee; not only by outward and gross sin, but by inward blindness of heart, unbelief, doubt, despondency, impatience, pride, selfishness, carnal lusts, avarice, envy, hatred, and malice, and by other sinful passions which are naked and open in thy sight, O Lord, but which we cannot fully understand or confess unto thee. But we do sincerely repent and are heartily sorry for these misdoings and we fervently implore thy forgiveness and favor through thy dear Son, Jesus Christ; being firmly resolved by the help of the Holy Spirit, to amend our sinful lives.

That is just the introduction to the confession. The confession continues for two additional pages. Then in the absolution the Pastor spoke these words:

I therefore declare to you who do truly repent and believe in Jesus, the entire forgiveness of all your sins in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. On the other hand, by the same authority, I declare unto the impenitent and unbelieving, that so long as they continue in their impenitence God hath not forgiven their sins and will assuredly visit their iniquities upon them, if they turn not from their evil ways and come to true repentance and faith in Christ, ere the day of grace be ended.

In each new hymnal since then, the language has been softened, the length of the order shortened, and "repentance" no longer mentioned. Not long

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ago, I forbid use of a contemporary worship resource that had us confessing “the corporate sins of America.” I firmly made my point that I come to worship to confess my own sins, not the sins of others. If the current trend continues, some liturgies may preclude confession and simply declare that we all feel good about ourselves and affirm that God must feel the same way about us. The subtle influence of Satan is not more powerfully experienced than in convincing us that we are not sinning, evil does not exist, and there is no need for repentance.

Believing and repenting were uttered in the same breath by Jesus. Repentance means a complete change of mind and a new direction of the will, an altered purpose in life, and a change in behavior. It is more than being sorry, expressing remorse, or admitting mistakes. Repentance is a moral and spiritual transformation.

None of this is possible apart from the grace that is ours through Jesus Christ. At the baptism of Jesus, we are reminded of our own baptisms and the promises we receive of forgiveness and eternal life through faith in Him. In Jesus, we are free to confess our sin because we are certain of His all-sufficient grace. We are free to confess because we are already connected to the lifeline of God’s infinite love for us in Jesus. Our confession expresses our faith and trust in Christ and His promises. Confession is one of the most important ways to live out our baptisms.

Repentance and transformation are clearly incorporated into our understanding of baptism. The water is a sign of both death and birth. In the waters of baptism the “old Adam” is drowned and a new creation is drawn out of the same waters. The words that introduce the baptismal liturgy are these:

In holy baptism our gracious heavenly Father liberates us from sin and death by joining us to the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. We are born children of a fallen humanity; in the waters of baptism we are reborn children of God and inheritors of eternal life.

We are buried with Christ in baptism and we are raised with Him.

When the Gospel was first preached on the island of Barbados, several accepted the invitation to be baptized. When they arrived at the water for the baptismal service the women were dressed in nightgowns and the men in striped pajamas. The missionaries were afraid this might be misunderstood and urged the candidates to change their clothes. They refused. The missionaries allowed it reluctantly and decided to be sure this didn’t happen the next time. Before the next baptismal service, the missionaries attended a funeral and noticed the corpse was dressed in pajamas. It was explained, “We believe when a person dies, they are asleep in Christ, so we are buried in our sleep wear.” Then the missionary understood. The baptism had been explained as being buried with Christ so the candidates wore their burial clothes. The sinful self must be buried so the new person in Jesus can emerge.

In our baptism we receive a new identity in Christ. We are given a new name in baptism. To our given name, the name of Christ is added. In baptism, I became John Fredrick Bradosky, Christian. This spiritual rebirth provides the promise of forgiveness, the assurance of eternal life, and, through the work of the Holy Spirit, repentance and transformation. Since my life is in Christ I no longer need to fear death. I am free to confess all the sin that His revealing love exposes, trusting in His forgiveness. In this way I live out my identity in Christ. In this season of Epiphany, as the light reveals the identity of Jesus, we pray it will also expose not only our sin, but our identity in Christ.

Paul writes in his letter to the Galatians, “You are all children of God through faith in Christ Jesus. For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ” (Galatians 3:26-27). The words spoken to Jesus at the Jordan are words for us to hear. They are addressed to us as well: “You are my Son, (you are my Daughter,) with you I am well pleased.” St. Augustine paraphrases, [God says to us] “On You I have set my favor; through You I am doing what is my pleasure.”

Through you I am blessing your family...

Through you I am reaching people in your workplace...

Thrivent Action Teams help people work together to make a difference

A new program from Thrivent Financial will provide resources for Thrivent members to work together with others to make a difference in the lives of others.

Thrivent Action Teams are an opportunity for Thrivent members to receive \$250 in seed money to involve others in working together on a common project. The seed money is to be used to purchase project supplies or promotional materials to make the project a success.

The projects can be educational, fund-raising, or work projects. The Thrivent website suggests a wide variety of possibilities including educational projects like an identity-theft or college planning workshops and work projects like community gardening, quilting, or organizing a food drive.

Thrivent Action Teams were introduced in a limited area over the last two years. The new program is now available throughout the United States.

At one NALC congregation in the trial area, a Thrivent member used the \$250 in seed money to purchase the items needed for Lutheran World Relief Personal Care Kits and then involved congregational members in working together to compile the kits. Another used the funds for LWR School Kits.

The congregation had members put together Action Teams for food pantries and women's shelters and to paint the church. One project involved church youth in purchasing Christmas gifts for needy children. A Boy Scout organized an Action Team as a part of his Eagle Scout Project at the church.

Projects must be approved by Thrivent and reported after they are completed. Each Thrivent member is eligible to lead two Thrivent Action Teams per calendar year.

You can learn more about Thrivent Action Teams and apply online at thrivent.com/actionteam.

Bishop's message

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Through you I am working my perfect plan...

Through you I am strengthening my ministry in your congregation...

You are God's beloved. Everything must start there, struggling to remember and live your baptismal identity in Christ, free to confess.

2015, like every year, will have its ups and downs. "Remember who you are."

Some ventures will fail. Some will succeed.

"Remember who you are."

Temptations will come to give up or become cynical.

"Remember who you are."

Jesus says to us: "You are my Beloved, in you I am pleased."

Bishop to host tour

NALC Bishop John Bradosky will host a trip to the Biblical and classical sites of Greece and Turkey Oct. 21-31. The 11-day tour will follow the journeys of St. Paul and includes a three-day cruise. There is an optional three-day extension to Rome.

Contact Pam Charas at mcharas@earthlink.net or 937-434-0993 for a flyer and registration form.

Worship Wars Peace Talks

2015 Canadian Rockies Theological Conference

“Worship Wars Peace Talks” is the theme of the 2015 Canadian Rockies Theological Conference April 14-17 at the Coast Hotel and Conference Centre in Canmore, Alberta, just outside of the beautiful Banff National Park.

The conference will feature presentations by traditional Lutheran liturgical scholars and a contemporary Christian musician as well as discussions and dialog between the presenters and participants.



Steve Bell



Amy Schifrin



Frank Senn

Contemporary music will be represented by Steve Bell, a singer-songwriter and guitarist based in Winnipeg, Manitoba. He is among the best-known Christian musicians in Canada and is an accomplished songwriter and record producer.

Traditional music and liturgy will be represented by the Rev. Dr. Amy Schifrin and the Rev. Dr. Frank Senn. Dr. Schifrin is President of the North American Lutheran Seminary and Director of the NALS Seminary Center, and Associate Professor of Liturgy and Homiletics at Trinity School for Ministry in Ambridge, Pa. Dr. Senn is a Lutheran pastor,

liturgical scholar, and Senior of the Society of the Holy Trinity.

Steve Bell will also perform a concert on the Wednesday night of the conference.

The cost for the conference is \$300 (Canadian) (until March 13) and includes breakfast and lunch each day.

More information is available on Facebook or by contacting Pastor Karl Johnsen at 780-433-7082 or kjohnsen@calvarylutheran.ca.

Canadian youth gathering is May 15-18

The NALC Canadian Mission District will be hosting a Lutheran Youth Together Event (LYTE) Gathering May 15-18 at Goldeye Centre near Nordegg, Alberta. The Goldeye Centre provides many opportunities for outdoor activities.

This event is for youth who are in Grade 7-12. Young adults are also encouraged to attend as Leaders in Training and Example.

The theme of the event will be “Deeper” as participants will ponder deeply what it means to have our identity in Christ through our Baptism. NALC Bishop John Bradosky will be the keynote speaker.

Tangled Blue will lead worship. Aimee and Joel Pakan, the members of the group, are gifted worship leaders.

The mission component of the event is based on our theme on Baptism and water. Kevin Herr of Water Missions International will share their life-changing ministry of providing safe drinking water.

The cost of the four-day gathering is \$340 (until Feb. 15), which includes all meals, accommodations and programming.

For more information contact Shelly Ree at luthyouth@xplornet.com or 780-674-2788.

Some Random Thoughts

This month's column is a collection of stories I've come across that have implications for Christian ministry. Don't look for a common theme among these stories; there is none.

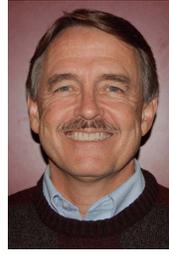
Leadership Journal had a brief article entitled, "Disney's Ideas that Didn't Work." We tend to think of Walt Disney as an entrepreneur who only knew success. However, Mr. Disney, when he was developing the original Disneyland theme park back in the 1950s, also cast some visions that never caught on.

Some of his ideas for the new theme park included a farm area filled with living miniature versions of various animals, a miniature newspaper office ("Please, Mom! I want to set the bold type again!"), and a catalog to order your own rare and exotic animals. So reflect on this the next time you're beating yourself up for a ministry initiative that never quite got off the ground.

Another column from *Leadership Journal* explored the role that *less frequent* attendance has played in the decline of overall worship attendance in the United States. Apparently this is the single greatest factor in this decline, and it has become a major issue among congregations in just the last few years. The article gives a hypothetical example of how this impacts average weekend attendance.

Suppose, a few years back, you had 200 members who attended worship every weekend. However, now 100 of those members are in attendance only three weekends each month. The result? Your average worship attendance has dropped from 200 to 175. The point? Often declining worship attendance is not about members leaving your congregation or even becoming inactive. Instead, they are simply scaling back in the frequency of their attendance. Often these less-frequent worshipers don't understand that this slight change in their worship patterns can have a real impact on your congregation's worship life.

An example, from the Dilbert comic strip on how *not* to lead: "Who's up for some leadership? Watch me define behavior, align your goals with company



In Pursuit of the Great Commission

Pastor Don Brandt

objectives, prioritize respect, deal directly with conflict, maintain a positive attitude, and pretend to care."

I came across a fascinating story on *Presbyterian Outlook's* website. *Outlook* is an unofficial publication of the Presbyterian Church (USA) (PCUSA). The story was about what happened when the Houston First Presbyterian Church had a vote to leave the PCUSA.

As many of you know, hundreds of PCUSA congregations have either already left or are attempting to leave their denomination due to the same issues that have impacted the ELCA since 2009. The major difference in the polity of the PCUSA is that departing congregations, if they intend to keep their property/facilities, must pay a price determined by their regional presbyteries.

Needless to say, depending on the presbytery, this can have a serious impact on a congregation's efforts to leave the denomination. The most egregious example of this was when the San Francisco Presbytery insisted that Menlo Park Presbyterian Church pay the presbytery \$8.89 million if it intended to keep its property. (The senior pastor of this congregation, by the way, is the well-known author John Ortberg. Remarkably, the congregational vote to leave — even with this punitive fine — was an overwhelming 94 percent.)

Now to how this "journey" played out for First Presbyterian of Houston. The congregational vote was held in February 2014. The congregational discernment process prior to the vote was 13

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months long. This process included adult Sunday school classes on the relevant issues, a series of evening “Learning Journeys” to which pro and con speakers were invited, prayer services, and fellowship dinners. The entire pastoral staff and Session (the Presbyterian term for church council) were unanimous in their support of a vote to leave the PCUSA. The financial cost imposed by the Presbytery was already agreed to by congregational leaders. A two-thirds vote was necessary to leave. There were 1,681 members present for the vote, with 1,085 voting to leave the PCUSA and 596 in opposition. This was 36 votes short of the required two-thirds. The motion to depart the PCUSA failed.

The *Presbyterian Outlook* article (the *Outlook* editor was actually on the local Presbytery board that negotiated with First Presbyterian) described the congregation’s reaction to the announced vote tally as “hushed” and “stunned.” The senior pastor and many of the elders were, according to the article, “obviously shaken.”

Why do I share this? It’s a reminder of a couple of important principles whenever congregations are dealing with controversial and potentially divisive votes.

1. Understand that it is extremely difficult, regardless of how thorough and lengthy your education/discernment process is, to actually change minds. The great majority of your members will come to controversial/divisive votes with the same opinions they had before your education process ever began.

2. Never assume that you know your congregation well enough to accurately predict, in advance, what the vote outcome will be. Not, that is, unless you have some means of accurately polling your members in advance of the vote.

Related to this last point, in 2011 my congregation conducted a confidential, thorough poll of our members prior to scheduling our first vote. This was after our education process. Everyone understood that the results of this poll would determine whether we would go ahead and schedule that first vote. So both sides were motivated to turn in their sealed and signed poll ballots. The result of this poll was

82 percent in favor of leaving our previous church body and 17 percent in opposition (1 percent abstained). We immediately announced the poll results to the congregation and set the date for our vote. The actual vote was 92 percent in favor. (Some of those who polled in opposition chose not to attend the congregational meeting.) The second vote, three months later, was 95 percent.

My point? It is absolutely essential, prior to any potentially divisive congregational vote, that you have an accurate reading — in advance — of what your final vote will be. Otherwise you risk an outcome where the majority of your members end up on the losing side of your vote. Few congregations can recover from that kind of scenario. And if your “polling” efforts indicate it’s too close to call? Then it is probably best not to schedule that vote.

A final, more inspiring item to conclude this column. It’s a quote from the NALC Bishop John Bradosky. “Our congregations cannot become centers for building fallout shelters, but they must instead be centers for equipping people with skills and confidence to take the Gospel to the ends of the earth, beginning with the person next door.” Amen.

Pastor Don Brandt serves Our Savior’s Lutheran Church in Salem, Ore.

Ratification process

The 2014 NALC Convocation approved an amendment to the NALC constitution which would allow more flexibility in scheduling the annual NALC Convocation. For it to go into effect, the amendment must be ratified by a two-thirds majority of NALC congregations voting in the ratification process.

Congregations are encouraged to consider the decision at their next congregational meeting or to schedule a special meeting for this purpose. Congregations are asked to vote by Jan. 25 and to report their decision as soon as possible.

Congregations were sent information about the ratification process. The information is also available online at www.thenalc.org.



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