

A THEOLOGICAL CAUTION FROM A DIGITAL PROFESSIONAL: THOUGHTFULNESS IN THE TIME OF CORONAVIRUS

By the Rev. Andrew S. Ames Fuller
Director of Communications

As the strange state of affairs we find ourselves in carries on, I have been in the midst of endless conversations about the nature of ministry during a 21st century pandemic. Many are looking to technological tools to aid their congregations during this time. As one who has been involved in decisions and practices involving church technology for nearly a decade now, I thought it would behoove me to offer some examples taking place across the North American Lutheran Church alongside my own thoughts and suggestions.



To begin, I offer an encouraging perspective about the use of technology for Lutherans. Without a doubt, technological innovation was essential for the Wittenberg Reformation and the spread of evangelicalism in the 16th century. While Martin Luther's *95 Theses* were handwritten, they might have gone unnoticed were it not for the introduction a few decades earlier of a new technology: the

printing press. As an entrepreneurial venture, German printers set the *95 Theses* into type, printed them, and reproduced them. When they saw how rapidly they were selling, they made copies and copies and copies. Viral networking had begun. Much of Luther's writings throughout his career used a

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relatively new form of publication that he almost singlehandedly perfected: pamphlets, known in German as *Flugschriften*. The Bible that Luther translated into the common tongue was quickly printed and reproduced for the German people to hear and read in language they could understand. As with the internet centuries later, Luther showed how a new information technology could change the world.

At the same time, Luther was not a radical. His doctrinal stances and the practices he stood on were *not* innovative. For Luther, the claim of the Reformation was its catholicity and orthodoxy — that the new evangelical movement was in continuity with the apostolic rule of faith and the creeds that the Church held so dear. Time and time again, the reformers state in the Lutheran Confessions that “we have clear consciences ... since we know that our confession is true, godly, and catholic.”¹ Even when discussing corporate worship, the reformers note: “Our people have been unjustly accused of having abolished the Mass. But it is obvious, without boasting, that the Mass is celebrated among us with greater devotion and earnestness than among our opponents. The people are instructed more regularly and with the greatest diligence concerning the holy sacrament, to what purpose it was instituted, and how it is to be used, namely, as a comfort to terrified consciences. In this way, the people are drawn to Communion and to the Mass. At the same time, they are also instructed about other, false teaching concerning the sacrament.”²

This tension between innovation and catholicity is the very place we find ourselves in the era of coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19). And yet, perhaps this is where we find ourselves in general in the digital age of this new millennium. With the rise of new technologies such as the telephone, radio and television in the early 20th century, we have seen innovative uses of these media change the landscape and culture of the Church in North America. For years, pastors have been able to do meaningful pastoral care by dialing a number on their phones — meaningful one-on-one communication. They have been able to lead evening prayer through the radio, and teach seminary classes through video recordings

— one-to-many communication. With the internet today, we can see and hear each other on our computers and devices live, with hundreds participating and interacting with each other at the same moment — many-to-many communication. While these are incredible evolutions in our communication methods, Marshall McLuhan's theory from the 1960s still holds true today: “the medium is the message.” McLuhan's point? The nature of a communication medium (the channel or stream through which a message is transmitted) can become as or more important than the meaning or content of the message. A medium is never neutral and always affects the message. Of course, all of this simply reminds me of a more historic maxim attributed to St. Prosper of Aquitaine, a defender of St. Augustine of Hippo: “*Lex orandi, lex credendi*” or “how one prays is how one believes.” Our methods and practices can perhaps teach more theology than our words.

All of this leaves us with our current situation: in mid-March, the U.S. federal government recommended gatherings of no more than 10 people, reiterating on April 1 that this specifically included church services, and as of April 3, 45 out of 50 states have “stay-at-home” executive orders in place. In Canada, the prime minister and premiers are urging citizens to stay at home as well. This inability to gather together with full force begs the question of our “physicality” as the Church. What does it mean to gather together as an “assembly,” and how can the Gospel be “purely preached” and the holy Sacraments “administered according to the Gospel” in this strange time?³ How do we use media and methods that faithfully speak the message of the Gospel, without them becoming obstacles to it? To this end, we look at several case studies:

For Pastor Christopher Porter (serving both Advent Lutheran Church in Winchester, Virginia, and Lebanon Lutheran Church in Lebanon, Virginia), the coronavirus pandemic has “pretty much shut down both parishes.” For Porter, the constantly changing needs have been a challenge, but he has focused on checking in with his parishioners. He has also started recording morning and evening prayer services, and he continues to use video to preach the Gospel to his congregations, noting that as Christians, “we are in a

time of complication. During this time, we must cling to the Word.” Porter has made the decision not to have Communion during the pandemic, reflecting on this as a time when we “long to have Holy Communion in the same way that we long to be together.” When it comes to the Sacrament, Porter urges caution and faithfulness to that which we have received from Christ and the apostles. “This is not just arcane or scholarly, but a practical issue of comfort,” says Porter. “We all want comfort, but we don’t want to shortchange ourselves. We don’t want to prefer some other sacrament that we’ve decided about — that we’ve speculated about. No, we want the Holy Supper that Christ Himself has instituted, and that is the one that can truly give us comfort at this time. We want to hold to the things that are clear in the Church. We don’t want to be out on a limb. We want to do things according to Christ’s own institution. And there, in Christ’s own Word, exists true abiding and lasting comfort for Christ’s Church and the whole world.”

In the Upper Peninsula of Michigan, Pastor Hans Tolpingrud (Salem Lutheran Church in Bark River, Michigan) has also focused his efforts on his ministry context. All activity at the church has been suspended (including any weddings and funerals), although the building has remained open as a place of prayer, funneling all traffic through one entrance with guidance for hand-washing and sanitizing at that point (both inside and outside the building), as well as using candles that completely burn out and have no need for a reusable lighter. In Tolpingrud’s setting, hard copy mailings and phone calls are a necessity as the church does not have a website (but it does have Facebook), and many parishioners do not have email. So Tolpingrud has spent much of his time calling his parishioners daily, and he has sent them hard copies of morning and evening suffrages, as well as readings and devotions. Tolpingrud is venturing into videos for those in his congregation that can access them, but he is concerned for the pastors and congregations in this time who have jumped to filling their time with digital content. “This is increasingly looking like a marathon rather than a sprint, and we need to be prepared for this to last a while,” writes Tolpingrud. “If you’re setting a routine that doesn’t allow you to recover (or doesn’t allow



you to focus enough energy on your family), you are not going to be able to serve well ... I’m concerned for folks who are going to come out of this burned out at a point when everyone will be looking forward to getting going again.” Noting that the Church has been in similar situations before throughout history, and will certainly survive this, Tolpingrud also longs for the normal sacramental life of the Church, stating: “Whether it’s a weekly mailing or a weekly Zoom meeting, it is not a substitute for weekly worship, and we should expect that once we are able to gather together again, our pastors’ and parishes’ efforts will be redirected toward that time because we are all now learning, in a very hard way, just how wonderful it is to be in the physical presence of one another. When this is over, I hope that the level of energy that is going into all of these different projects gets put into celebrating the liturgy of the Church, together again, because, after this, that cannot be something that is ever taken for granted again.”

Pastors Tom Hux and Jody Becker (Our Savior’s Lutheran Church in Salem, Oregon) believe it is essential to continue offering the spiritual and emotional support that we are called to share with each other and our communities during this time, seeing this as a true opportunity in the midst of adversity. In Oregon, Our Savior’s has closed the building for regular worship services but is providing streaming video of Sunday services for their congregation. Then, following the service, Hux and Becker encourage their congregation to drive to the church where they can pray with the pastors, confess

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and receive absolution, and receive Communion family after family, car after car. Especially aware of those who are immune-compromised and at high risk, Becker notes that “everything is done with incredible precaution, no direct contact with hands.” One area that has been hard for Our Savior's is funerals. Recently, they had a member pass away, but with Oregon's stay-in-place orders, they have not been able to gather together. Becker notes that they look forward to the chance to gather in the future and give thanks for the life lived faithfully.

In Canada, Pastor Mac de Waal (Bethlehem Lutheran Church in Outlook, Saskatchewan) has also closed the church to all public services. First and foremost is the safety of people, second is the witness of the church,” says de Waal. “We do not believe it to be a good witness in our context to be seen as defying government rules or even working to the letter of the law. We would rather witness our love and concern for the community by supporting the efforts to limit the transmission of this virus by practicing physical isolation as prescribed by government authorities.” Like other congregations, Bethlehem had been planning a drive-in service on an unused plot of land for Easter Sunday, but with governmental restrictions continuing to increase, this plan had to be abandoned for safety concerns. However, many aspects of discipleship are continuing to thrive in live online video meetings, including confirmation, Bible studies and other devotions. Communion is offered two evenings per week to household groups of eight or less, and precautions are observed to sanitize and prevent direct contact. For de Waal, financial concerns during this time are also rising. “If this continues and the offerings given to the church remain low, we may have to consider layoffs,” says de Waal, “[although], the Canadian Government may now have some relief programs available for staffing costs.”

For Pastor Steve Turnbull (Upper Arlington Lutheran Church in Columbus, Ohio), this time of pandemic has been incredibly fruitful for personal discipleship and connectedness among his parishioners. Each day at 9 a.m. and 9 p.m., various members of the staff and community lead prayer and devotions live on Facebook, taking prayer requests and singing songs

of hope with parishioners. Upper Arlington has used this time to see a renewal in the daily spiritual lives of its parishioners, focusing on the Lutheran value of family faith formation at home. Pastor Jeff Morlock, who serves at Upper Arlington and is also the dean of the Southeastern Ohio Mission District, states that “instead of livestreaming a ‘prepackaged’ worship service, Upper Arlington is offering components (music, prayer, sermon, discussion questions) so that people can take ownership of leading and participating together with their families or individually.”

At St. John's Lutheran Church in Westboro, Missouri, Pastor Fritz Brandenburg has been venturing into new realms of technology. During Sunday services, St. John's has been streaming their services live on Facebook, but they have also rigged up a way to broadcast the services through the radio up to a half mile away. Some parishioners come to the church as usual but stay in their cars in the parking lot, tuned into the service as it happens. Others stay home and participate there.

With Holy Week here, others are finding creative ways to encourage parishioners during perhaps the most significant time of the church year. Pastor Trina Peterson (A New Thing Christian Church in Lithonia, Georgia) spent two days driving over 200 miles to deliver Communion and palms for Palm Sunday to the homes of her parishioners, as well as pick up food donations. Items such as these palms will be used by parishioners in their homes during A New Thing's online daily prayer gatherings for Holy Week.

Back at Our Savior's in Salem, Oregon, Pastors Hux and Becker led their congregation in a drive-through procession of the palms. Car after car, parishioners honked horns and waved their palms. Some picked up palms at the church, but others came with their own, not wanting to risk any contact. While some people kept their windows lowered, others kept them mostly closed. Our Savior's will be gathering in the parking lot for an Easter service where music and prayers will be shared.

Other churches, such as Upper Arlington, Concordia Lutheran Church in Kingsburg, California (led by Pastor Douglas Schoelles), and Hope Lutheran

Church in Cedar Hill, Texas (led by Pastors Joel and Wendy Berthelsen) are providing Tenebrae-style resources for their congregation during Holy Week that reflect on the seven last words of Jesus from the cross. Some congregations, such as Prince of Peace Lutheran Church in Fayetteville, Georgia (led by Pastor Scott Ness) are focusing this week on the stations of the cross.

Bishop Dan Selbo has also provided recorded sermons for Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and Easter Sunday that may be used by congregations who wish to do so.

For many years now, I have been encouraging churches toward having some sort of online footprint (website, Facebook, etc.) because in the digital world of the new millennium, “a church’s website is their new front door.” Most people who want information about a congregation will not enter the building to find it, nor will they attend a service to “taste and see.” Instead, non-parishioners will look at the website, the pictures and recordings, the beliefs and values, *before* they enter the front door. In the landscape of coronavirus, however, the front doors are closed, and digital tools might be necessary for a congregation to share the Gospel amongst even its own parishioners (beyond that of even those *out there* in the community). However, there are practical tools at play as well: if a majority of your congregation does not have computers or access to the internet, spending your time live streaming morning prayer on Facebook is not the answer right now. If you have a high number of a particular demographic (families with young children, those in care facilities, etc.), focus on how to resource and encourage that population during this time. If your church has never done morning prayer before (because in their normal lives they go to work early each morning), consider compline (prayer at the close of the day) as a practice that may carry over into the post-coronavirus world. If your congregation already has a tendency to downplay the Sacraments, emphasize Holy Communion as a live moment in order to caution against memorialism. Continual phone calls to your congregation, and simple encouragement for them to pray the daily offices with the daily Scripture readings can go a long way. Know your context and

your people. Whatever you do, please do not let another congregation’s digital methods during coronavirus be the benchmark for your own congregation’s ministry.

And most importantly, the tension between innovation and catholicity still exists. As ministers, we are still called to be faithful to the Gospel of Jesus Christ and to the Lutheran Confessions. The medium is still the message. *Lex orandi, lex credendi* is still relevant. And so, I would urge all of you to thoughtfully pray about the tools you will use. At some point, COVID-19 will end, and we will return to some version of the life we knew before. But there will be differences, and the methods and practices we used during this pandemic will shape the theology of our future and the culture of the Church in North America for the next generation. We have provided a lot of resources to use on the NALC website, but do not use them without pause; know *why* you use them, and *how* they affect your theology and culture. Be thoughtful, be faithful and be hopeful. For, as the Lutheran Confessions say: “faith receives in the present the forgiveness of sins and reconciliation, or God’s acceptance of us, on account of Christ. But hope is directed toward future good and future deliverance.”⁴ During this season of coronavirus, what more could we ask for?

The Rev. Andrew S. Ames Fuller is director of communications for the North American Lutheran Church. He is an ordained deacon in the Anglican Church in North America.

¹ Apology of the Augsburg Confession, Article XIV, in Kolb, Robert and Timothy J. Wengert, eds. *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000, page 222.

² Augsburg Confession, Article XXIV, in *The Book of Concord*, page 68. Luther also writes concerning the Mass in *Concerning the Order of Public Worship* (1523) (*Luther’s Works* 53:11–14) and *The German Mass and Order of Service* (1526) (*Luther’s Works* 53:53–90), and gives further instruction in *Large Catechism*, “The Lord’s Supper,” based on sermons by Luther delivered during Holy Week, 1529.

³ Augsburg Confession, Article VII, in *The Book of Concord*, page 42.

⁴ Apology of the Augsburg Confession, Article IV, in *The Book of Concord*, page 165.

BISHOP SELBO ASKS PASTORS NOT TO OFFER ‘VIRTUAL COMMUNION’

Bishop Daniel Selbo has sent a letter to the pastors of the North American Lutheran Church asking that they not offer “virtual” services of Holy Communion as a part of their attempts to minister to their congregations during the coronavirus pandemic. The letter is available online at thenalc.org.

Pastors throughout North America — and the world — have been seeking ways to serve their congregations during the coronavirus pandemic. Many churches are offering streaming video of their worship services on the internet. Some pastors have offered — or considered ways to offer — the Lord’s Supper to their members using the internet.

“The onslaught we are now experiencing with COVID-19, the coronavirus, is, at least in our lifetimes, unprecedented. Not only is its scope more significant than any of us might have expected, but the speed at which it has traveled has caught our world, our countries and our leaders, as well as those of us in the Church by surprise,” Bishop Selbo wrote to the pastors. “As a result, as pastors, we have all worked hard in recent weeks to serve our people faithfully. We have adjusted our approach to worship. We have improvised in the ways we offer pastoral care. We have expanded our use of technology and we have been challenged by a life experience in which we have no previous life experience.”

“Through it all, our pastors have been faithful. There is no doubt in my mind that each of our pastors, in whatever changes they have made, have done so in ways they believe are faithful to our Lutheran Confessions and the witness of Holy Scripture. Their decisions, without exception, have been made for the sake of serving the proclamation of the Gospel and the building up of the Body of Christ. I am proud of our clergy. I am proud of each of you. I thank you for your faithfulness during such an unforeseen and challenging time,” he wrote.

“As it relates to the practice of virtual communion, I have allowed our pastors to sort through the pros and cons of this practice and decide for themselves how to proceed, without taking the appropriate time for reflection and consultation necessary for the unity of the Church. While our people long for the Lord’s Supper and we long to provide them with opportunities to receive it, I believe it is best for now to refrain from this practice until we have spent the necessary time to discern, pray, and engage in theological reflection,” he wrote.

“For the sake of the unity of the North American Lutheran Church and the greater Church catholic, for the purpose of allowing our own NALC Ministerium the time to think and pray through the implications, pro and con, of this significant change in practice, and for the greater purpose of ensuring that our witness to the world of the saving power of Jesus Christ, offered to us through His cross and in the Sacrament of Holy Communion, is not divided, I request that we place a moratorium on the virtual sharing of the Lord’s Supper, until we have allowed ourselves sufficient time to come to a thoughtful and prayerful and collective understanding around such an important and significant question,” Bishop Selbo wrote.

“Until we come to a more unified understanding in our approach, in place of the visible Word, I encourage you to emphasize the power of the spoken Word, and to proclaim it, even as you offer forgiveness and absolution to your people. In so doing, remind them there have been many times in Christian history when the sisters and brothers who have gone before us have not been able to share the Sacrament. To honor their witness, to ensure the unity of ours, and to allow time for us, as a church body, to seek the guidance of the Holy Spirit in our discernment, this request is made for the sake of the greater good. Thank you for your understanding and grace,” he wrote.

DRIVE-IN CHURCH SERVICE IS A HIT IN YANKTON, SOUTH DAKOTA

Christ the King Lutheran Church, an NALC congregation in Yankton, South Dakota, was featured in the following story by Sean Bower of KELO-TV. It is reprinted courtesy of the KELOLAND Media Group. You can watch news story video at keloland.com.

Churches across the area continue to get creative when it comes to connecting with their congregations. At Christ the King Lutheran Church, they've been using Facebook Live to broadcast their services, but for the first time Palm Sunday, service was also broadcast over the radio.

Like any Sunday, church members filled up the parking lot ahead of the 9:30 a.m. service, but rather than head inside, they remained in their cars.

You've heard of drive-in movie theaters, but what about drive-in church? Here at Christ the King Lutheran Church in Yankton, South Dakota, that's exactly what they're doing in response to COVID-19.

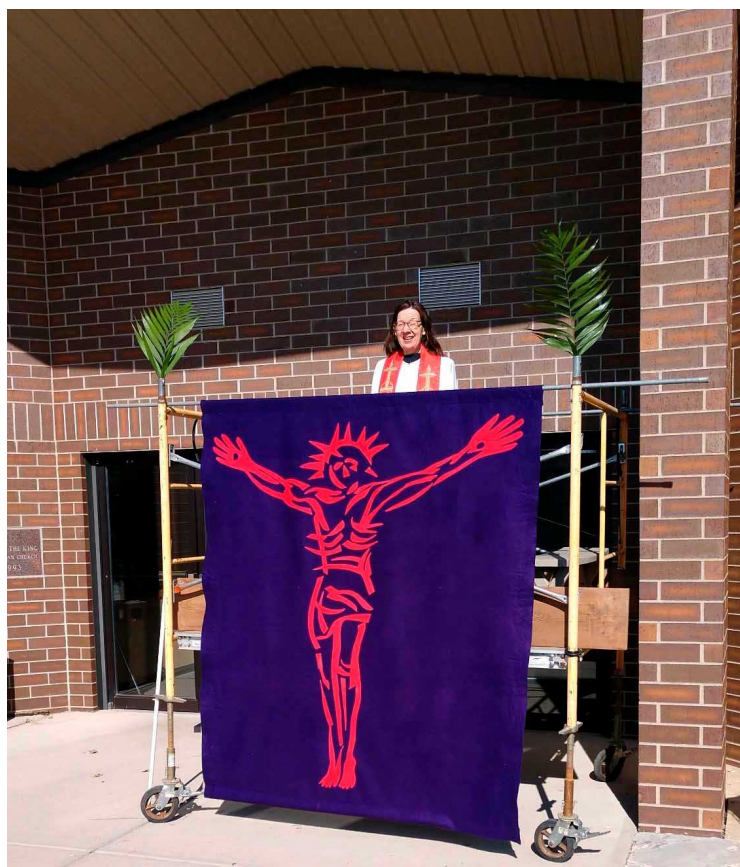
"There's folks that don't have a computer and don't have a phone, and so Facebook Live leaves them out," Pastor Dani Jo Bierwagen said.

The idea for the drive-in service came from the grounds the church is located on.

"It was a Yankton Drive-In movie theater, and on Sunday mornings Trinity Lutheran used to have services here at 8 o'clock in the morning. And we've got members that remember, helped with it," Bierwagen said.

All members had to do was tune their radios to 98.9. And much like their favorite songs, the service was a hit.

"We were going to consider it a blessing if we had nine to 10 cars. When I drove up this morning and saw the parking lot full, it was amazing," member Pauline Akland said.



Pastor Dani Jo Bierwagen leads a drive-in worship service from outside the entrance of Christ the King Lutheran Church in Yankton, South Dakota.

"Just to be able to be here, and just wave at each other through the windows, they were pumped. They were really excited about that. It was a blessing for them," Bierwagen said.

As the service concluded, it was even given its own horn ensemble send off.

"Just takes your breath away. But it was so wonderful to serve together and worship together," Akland said.

To broadcast over the radio, the church had to build its own transmitter, and then find its own frequency in order to follow FCC regulations.

BISHOP SELBO'S PASTORAL LETTER ON CORONAVIRUS

As we are all aware, the global spread of the coronavirus, COVID-19, has become a central topic of discussion and concern for many of us. It has caused us to think about the things we take for granted and to rethink how we go about the practices of our daily lives. In the church, this pandemic has caused us to consider new ways to approach what have been longstanding practices and traditions.

Over the past few weeks, I have received a good number of emails from our pastors, asking for encouragement and advice. The questions I have received have ranged from whether to greet each other with handshakes, to how to best distribute Holy Communion, to whether we should cancel worship and encourage people to simply stay home and pray? And what about offerings? And what about midweek Lenten worship? And what about a variety of other concerns related to the ministry we share?

The questions being asked are valid. The concerns regarding the coronavirus are real. Real lives are being touched, and real lives are being lost, and real people for whom our Lord died are being affected by this pandemic.

As bishop, I would encourage you to use your own wisdom in determining what would be best and most well-received in your own setting and by your own people. Talk with the pastors in your area. Reach out to those whose wisdom you trust. Do not be afraid to make changes. Err on the side of good health practices. Care for those who are isolated. Make phone calls to those unable to come to church. Be good pastors. Continue preaching and teaching the name of Jesus.

I would also encourage you to stay well informed of what the health professionals are telling us and to stay in touch with what is happening and being



FROM THE BISHOP

REV. DR. DAN SELBO
BISHOP

recommended in your own communities. I have included a few links at the close of this note as possible places for good advice, including a few helpful links provided by Mary Bates, NALC disaster response coordinator, and our own Disaster Response Team. We want and we need to be wise in what we do.

At the same time, we do not want or need to live in fear. I am not afraid of the coronavirus. I am not afraid of the possibility that it might infect someone in my own life, including myself. I am concerned and I want to be wise, but I am not afraid.

I have a long list of concerns related to the coronavirus. I am concerned for the elderly who are the most at risk. I am concerned for the disenfranchised and for those on the streets who have no one and nowhere to turn. I am concerned for the loss of reason that seems to have overtaken so many in their own personal response to what is truly a communal concern. I am concerned that people are stockpiling supplies they do not need, so much so that those who do need them are not able to find them. I am concerned for our hospitals and our clinics and for the doctors and nurses and overcrowded emergency rooms that are all being stretched. I am concerned for our economy and for those whose lives will be impacted by the loss of jobs. I am concerned for a long list of things, for these and many more, but I am

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not afraid — neither should we, as a Church, be afraid.

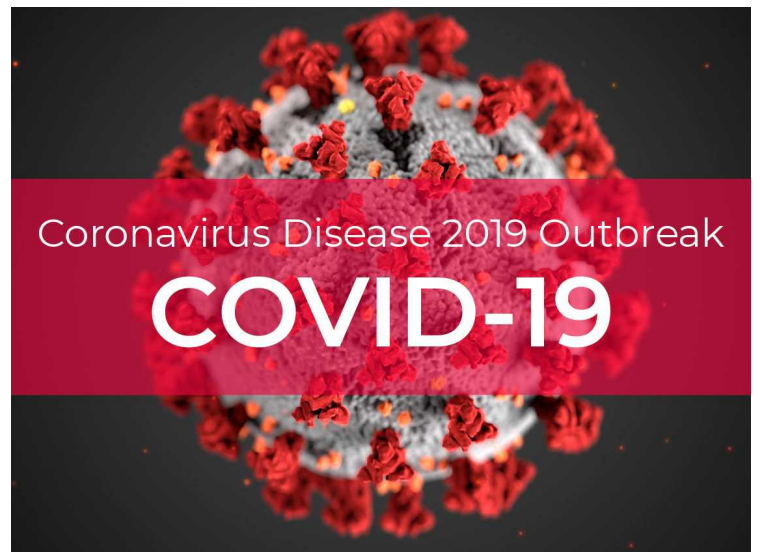
Rather than live in fear, let us together approach this challenge in faith. We have an opportunity to model for our children and for families and for each other what a faith-filled and faithful response can be. Instead of living in panic and in fear, being reactionary and taking a self-centered response, we have a chance to remain rational and reasoned and to approach this pandemic in a spirit of trust.

COVID-19 does not appear to be ending soon. Chances are, before it goes away, it will hit even closer to home. It is in many of our cities. It is making its way into our churches. It may well enter some of our families and the lives of those we love. Be careful. Be cautious. Be wise and practical in what you do. But do not live in fear.

What I fear, more than COVID-19, is that we will forget who we are and to whom we belong. As a church, we need to take preventive measures and commit ourselves to prayer. We need to rely on the health professionals for advice and entrust our lives to Christ. We need to take full advantage of the resources we have been given and follow the best-practices of those who can give helpful and health-giving advice. And then we need to step back and stay centered and remember and remind each other that we belong to Christ.

Know that I am praying for you and for our church body. I am praying for our leaders and for those who will make decisions throughout the world. I am praying for our pastors and for our congregations and for God's Holy Spirit to protect us as a church. I am praying and I will continue to pray until the coronavirus is over, and beyond, but I am not afraid.

The apostle Paul says it well. "Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 4:6-7 ESV).



We should be concerned. The coronavirus is real. But we cannot and we will not be afraid. We are the Church and, together, we belong to Christ.

The Rev. Dr. Dan Selbo
Bishop, North American Lutheran Church

A variety of resources related to the coronavirus epidemic and congregational life are available on the NALC website at thenalc.org/coronavirus.

MESSAGES FROM BISHOP SELBO FOR HOLY WEEK AND EASTER ARE ONLINE

Bishop Dan Selbo has recorded sermons for Maundy Thursday, Good Friday and Easter Sunday.

The video recordings may be downloaded from the NALC website for sharing in congregations or sharing on Facebook.

The messages are available on the NALC website, www.thenalc.org.

CONGREGATIONS ARE ELIGIBLE FOR CARES ACT CORONAVIRUS RELIEF FROM U.S. GOVERNMENT

NALC congregations in the United States are eligible for assistance from the U.S. government for employers in response to the coronavirus pandemic.

A centerpiece of the coronavirus relief act (the CARES Act) is a new program of forgivable loans to employers to help them meet payroll. Under this program, the federal government will guarantee loans, which will be forgiven if the employer does not terminate or lay off any employees between March 1 and June 30, 2020.

“Among the many concerns we face in our congregations is the potential for a significant decline in offerings during this difficult time. It is certainly reasonable to be concerned. The current crisis is unprecedented in living memory, and we know that congregational income has declined meaningfully in less severe periods of economic downturn,” Ryan Schwarz, NALC treasurer, and Bishop Dan Selbo wrote in an email sent to NALC congregations explaining the program.

“None of us want to contemplate reducing staff in this environment, and without a doubt the ministry of the church is needed all the more now in a hurting and scared world. Knowing this, we are committed to providing advice and assistance to NALC congregations as you manage through this challenging period,” they wrote.

The maximum amount of the loan is 2.5 times the employer’s average monthly payroll for the past 12 months. Loan funds can be used for payroll and other eligible operating expenses such as rent, utilities and mortgage interest (not principal) over a two-month period. Interest rate on the loans is 4 percent.

Loans will be made by banks which are authorized by the Small Business Administration (SBA).

The Evangelical Council for Financial Accountability has created some materials on this program and other governmental assistance related to the COVID-19 pandemic. Those resources can be found at ecfa.org/Content/ECFA-COVID-19-RESOURCES.

Christianity Today has published a summary of this program with four key action steps which you should take today if you are interested. It is available at christianitytoday.com/edstetzer/2020/march/caring-for-your-churchs-finance-through-cares-act.html.

“During this time when COVID-19, the coronavirus, is causing much uncertainty and concern, even within the Church, it is important that we, as followers of Jesus, remain wise and faithful as we address the challenges we face in ministry and as we support each other during this time of crisis. God is faithful and He has promised to be with us in all situations. Let us keep our eyes on Jesus, even as we work to support each other during this global pandemic,” the email said.

PANDEMIC RESOURCES ON NALC WEBSITE

Resources related to the coronavirus pandemic and congregational life are available on the NALC website at thenalc.org/coronavirus.

The website includes a variety of resources for congregations. Prayer and worship resources, as well as communication and technological resources, are available. The website also includes links to pandemic updates from the U.S. and Canadian governments.

Plans are to add resources to the website regularly.

NOMINATIONS SOUGHT FOR POSITIONS TO BE ELECTED AT 2020 CONVOCAATION

The NALC Nominating Committee is seeking the names of candidates for nomination to serve in positions to be elected at the 2020 NALC Convocation Aug. 6-7 in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

The Convocation will elect two members of the NALC Executive Council (one lay person and one pastor) and one member of the Court of Adjudication to four-year terms and two members of the Board of Regents of the North American Lutheran Seminary (NALS) to six-year terms.

Both pastors and lay members may be elected to the Court of Adjudication and NALS Board of Regents.

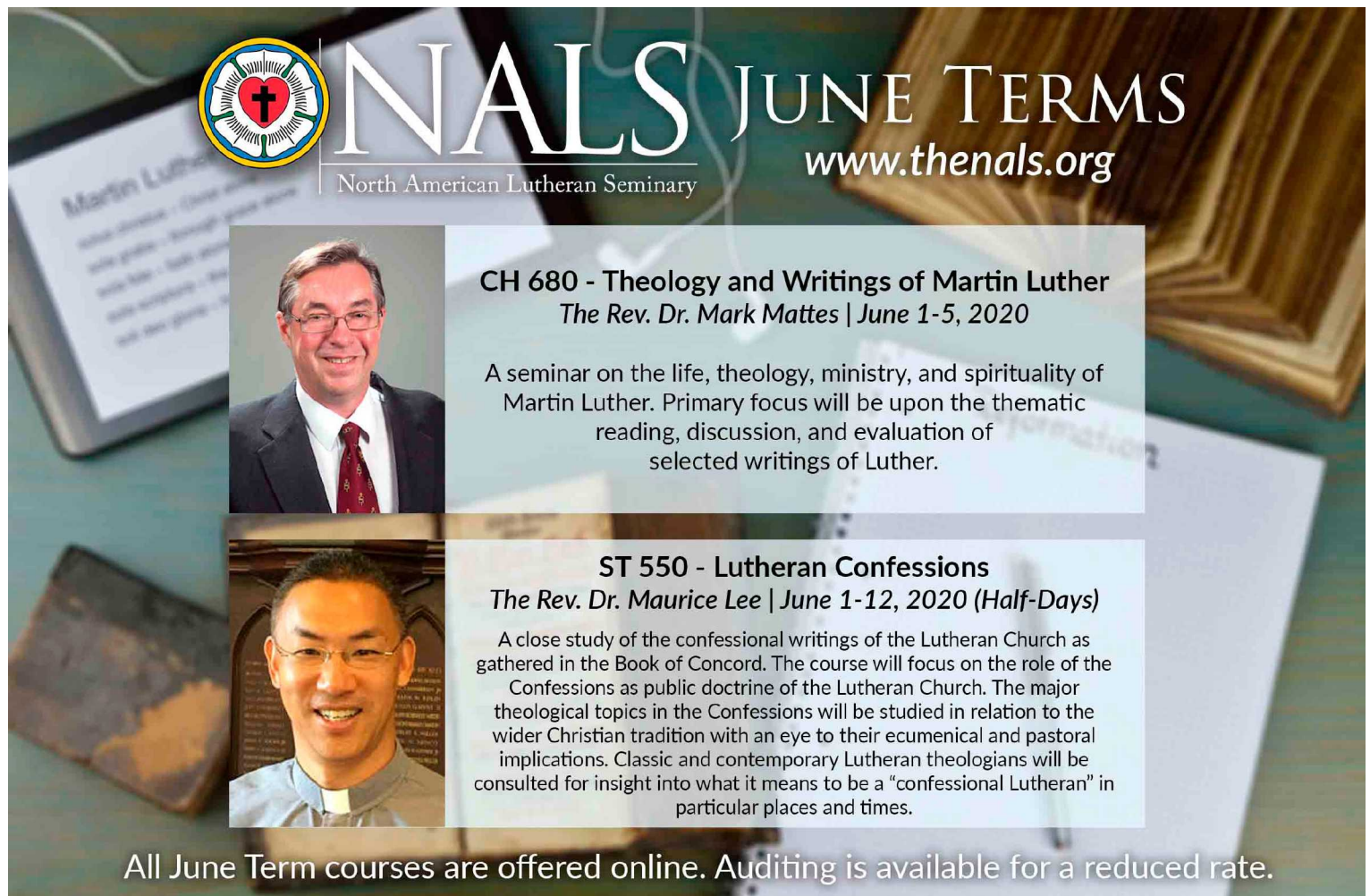
Congregations are encouraged to nominate individuals for any of the open positions. Those who feel called to serve in any of these positions are asked


to contact the leaders of their congregation to inform them of their openness to serving.


All nominations should be submitted by May 1. This will give the committee the time necessary to compile biographical information on the candidates and comply with the constitutional requirements to provide this information to NALC members.

To submit a name, please complete the Nomination Form available at thenalc.org/nominate. Nominees will be asked to complete the Nominee Biographical Form (also available online) and to provide a photo for publication with the biographical information.


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

The graphic features a background of a desk with a laptop, books, and papers. At the top left is the NALS logo, a circular emblem with a cross and a heart. To its right, the text 'NALS JUNE TERMS' is displayed in large, white, serif font, with 'www.thenals.org' below it. Below this, two course announcements are presented in white boxes. The first box includes a portrait of Dr. Mark Mattes and details for 'CH 680 - Theology and Writings of Martin Luther'. The second box includes a portrait of Dr. Maurice Lee and details for 'ST 550 - Lutheran Confessions'. At the bottom, a white banner contains the text: 'All June Term courses are offered online. Auditing is available for a reduced rate.'

 **NALS JUNE TERMS**
North American Lutheran Seminary www.thenals.org

**CH 680 - Theology and Writings of Martin Luther**
The Rev. Dr. Mark Mattes | June 1-5, 2020

A seminar on the life, theology, ministry, and spirituality of Martin Luther. Primary focus will be upon the thematic reading, discussion, and evaluation of selected writings of Luther.

**ST 550 - Lutheran Confessions**
The Rev. Dr. Maurice Lee | June 1-12, 2020 (Half-Days)

A close study of the confessional writings of the Lutheran Church as gathered in the Book of Concord. The course will focus on the role of the Confessions as public doctrine of the Lutheran Church. The major theological topics in the Confessions will be studied in relation to the wider Christian tradition with an eye to their ecumenical and pastoral implications. Classic and contemporary Lutheran theologians will be consulted for insight into what it means to be a "confessional Lutheran" in particular places and times.

All June Term courses are offered online. Auditing is available for a reduced rate.

PASTOR PHILLIP GAGNON CALLED AS ASSISTANT TO THE BISHOP FOR DOMESTIC MISSION, DISCIPLESHIP

The Rev. Phillip Gagnon of St. Albert, Alberta, has been called to serve as assistant to the bishop for domestic mission and discipleship for the North American Lutheran Church. Pastor Gagnon began his new position on Feb. 1.

“In considering possible additions to our staff, I chose Pastor Phil primarily because of his experience in ministry, his pastoral convictions and heart, his knowledge of the values and priorities of the NALC, and his ability to help us move forward in the vision we have been given and commitments we have made as a denomination. With responsibilities in domestic mission and discipleship, his gifts will be an asset in expanding and enhancing our efforts on both fronts,” said the Rev. Dr. Dan Selbo, NALC bishop.

“Secondarily, Pastor Phil was chosen because of the obvious connections he has in Canada and the not-so-obvious connections he has with several pastors and churches in Mexico. As a church body that spans North America, his presence on our staff will enable us to more effectively reach and serve our sisters and brothers in each of those neighboring countries,” Bishop Selbo said.

Pastor Gagnon will work with the NALC Missions Team, led by the Rev. Dr. Gemechis Buba, assistant to the bishop for missions.

Focusing his efforts in domestic mission, he will work with the Rev. Brad Hales, director for aging ministry and congregational renewal, and Jenny Brockman,



Phillip Gagnon

assistant for missions, to support efforts to plant new churches and provide congregational renewal.

In the area of discipleship, he will be working with the Life-to-Life Discipleship Team, chaired by the Rev. Dr. Eric Riesen, president of the North American Lutheran Seminary (NALC). Pastor Gagnon's work in this area will be to support pastors, lay leaders and congregations interested in intentionally developing disciple-making cultures within their congregations.

“Pastor Phil has an intimate knowledge of what we value as a church body, a keen awareness of what works in congregational life, and the gifts and abilities to make

things happen. I am encouraged by the wisdom and experience he brings, and excited to see where and how God will use his gifts,” Bishop Selbo said.

“In the two areas in which he is primarily responsible — domestic mission and discipleship — Pastor Phil's presence on our staff will give much needed support to efforts that are central to the values, witness and work we share in the NALC,” Bishop Selbo said.

“It was a distinct honor and surprise to be given the call to serve the NALC in this position,” Pastor Gagnon said. “I look forward to serving the wider church in this exciting position and am once again struck by the wonderful variety of gifted people that we have within our church. There are so many groups and individuals each striving to serve God and

Continued on Page 13

neighbor to the best of their abilities that I am humbled to be in the midst of them all.

“I hope you will be patient with me as I learn the ropes alongside you. I look forward to being drawn into the Spirit’s purposes for us all in God’s future as we walk together. May God bless and use us all in our common witness to the glory of His love and mercy revealed in His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, for we have a beautiful story of love to proclaim together,” Pastor Gagnon said.

Pastor Gagnon is a graduate of Lutheran Theological Seminary in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan. He has served two congregations since his ordination in 1997 and comes to the NALC with 23 years of pastoral ministry experience.

His first parish was Golden Valley Lutheran Church in Viking, Alberta. Most recently, he served for nearly 18 years at St. Albert Evangelical Lutheran Church in St. Albert, Alberta (suburban Edmonton). He and his wife, Patricia, live in St. Albert. They have three adult children.

Pastor Gagnon was dean of the NALC’s Canadian Mission District for four years and was involved in the creation of the constitution of the NALC — Canada Section. He has served on the Board of Regents of the North American Lutheran Seminary from its inception. He was one of the nominees for NALC bishop at the 2019 Convocation.

Pastor Gagnon has taught widely on the topic of exorcism and the occult and world religions and new religious groups — from Canada to California, to Ethiopia and Korea. He is the author of *Deliver Us From Evil*, a manual on exorcism from a Lutheran perspective. He is the co-planner of the annual Canadian Rockies Theological Conference.

Pastor Gagnon’s hobbies include painting and reading on a variety of theological topics. His art has been featured in galleries in the United States and Canada. “In art I can escape the stresses of everyday life and in between the brush strokes I find joy in creating and expressing the beauty of God’s creation in my own limited palette. But in delving into that

creative process I also find time to think and to pray about my family, my parish and the communion I am blessed to be part of,” he said.

An added benefit of the addition of Pastor Gagnon to the NALC staff comes simply from the fact that he lives in Canada. His presence on Canadian soil will enable the NALC to more effectively serve its Canadian churches and give a more tangible expression to our continental identity.

Along with the inherent benefits from his presence in Canada, Pastor Gagnon has also led 15 mission trips into Mexico. In the process, he has developed strong relationships with a network of congregations and pastors in the southern part of North America.

The hope is that Pastor Gagnon’s joining the NALC staff will enable the church to more effectively support its Canadian churches, further develop relationships with our sisters and brothers in Mexico and strengthen its continental efforts to bear witness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

We are excited to welcome Pastor Gagnon to our staff and pray that God will use our efforts in the North American Lutheran Church to further the work of His kingdom through us.

CONGREGATIONAL ANNUAL REPORTS

Congregations are reminded to complete their annual report to the NALC.

Congregations were sent an email with a link to an online form to report the status of the congregation as of Dec. 31, 2019.

Congregations are asked to complete the annual report by June 1. The report may be accessed online at thenalc.org/congregationalreport.

Please contact Anne Gleason, agleason@thenalc.org, with any questions about completing the report.

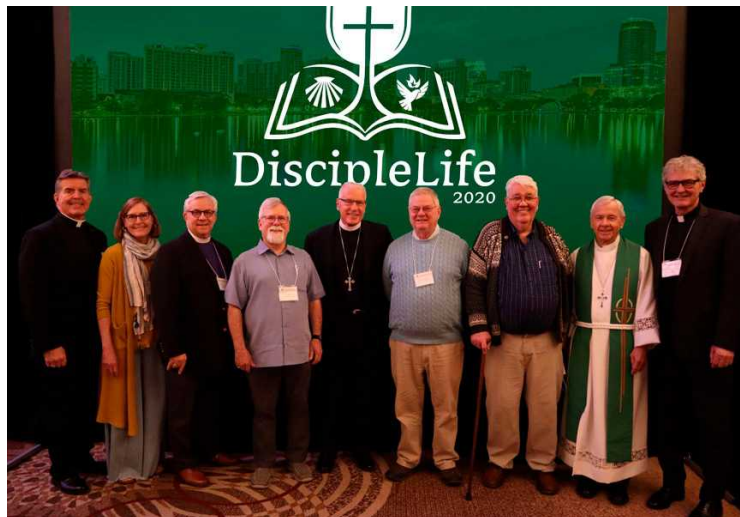
DISCIPLELIFE 2020 CONFERENCE

Hundreds of Lutherans and Anglicans from throughout North America gathered Feb. 13-15 at the Sheraton Orlando North in Orlando, Florida for DiscipleLife 2020 — a joint conference of the North American Lutheran Church (NALC) and the Anglican Church in North America (ACNA).

The theme of the conference was “A Vision for Forming Disciples Through Word and Sacrament.”

The conference was preceded by a meeting of the NALC Ministerium.

Video and audio recordings of presentations at the gathering are available online at disciplelife2020.org.



Speakers for the DiscipleLife 2020 Conference pose for a group photo.



“Word and Sacrament in a Disciple-Making Congregation” was the focus of a plenary address by the Rev. Dr. John Pless, assistant professor of pastoral ministry and missions, at Concordia Theological Seminary in Fort Wayne, Indiana.



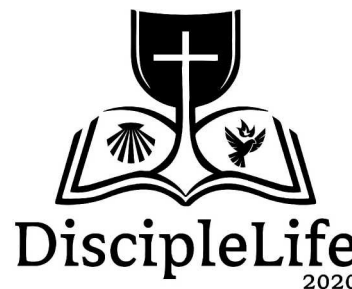
The Rev. Dr. Foley Beach, archbishop of the ACNA, spoke about the ACNA’s focus on discipleship.



The Rev. Dr. Dan Selbo, bishop of the NALC, led a session on planting disciple-making congregations. He also preached at the closing worship service.



Speakers for DiscipleLife 2020 take part in a panel discussion.





Katherine Coolidge, director of parish and diocesan services for the Catherine of Siena Institute in Colorado Springs, Colorado, talked about "Creating a Disciple-Making Culture in Your Congregation."



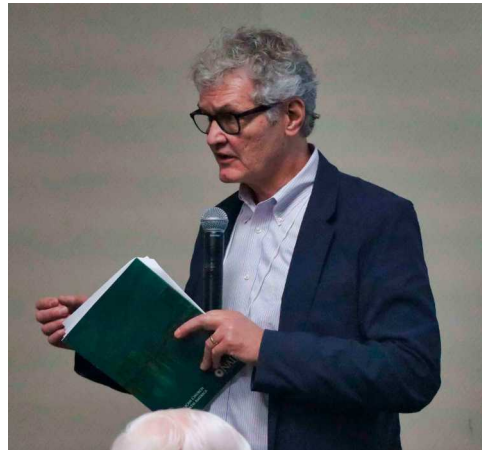
The Rev. John Bradosky, bishop emeritus of the NALC, delivered an opening keynote address on how a renewed focus on the Great Commission changes lives, congregations and affects real change in the culture around us.



The Rt. Rev. Dr. Todd Hunter, bishop of the ACNA Diocese of Churches for the Sake of Others and founder of the Telos Collective, addressed "Vision of a Christian – Life as a Disciple of Jesus."



The Rev. Lisa J. Schwandt, dean of the ACNA College of Deacons for the Anglican Diocese of the Western Gulf Coast and lead pastor for discipleship at HopePointe Anglican Church in The Woodlands, Texas, led a devotional Bible study.



The Rev. Dr. Eric Riesen, president of the North American Lutheran Seminary and chair of the NALC's Life-to-Life Discipleship Team, led one of several breakout sessions offered during Discipleship 2020.



The Rev. Dr. Gemechis Buba, assistant to the bishop for missions for the NALC, opened the conference with a devotional Bible study.



Hundreds of Lutherans and Anglicans from throughout North America attended DiscipleLife 2020 – a joint conference of the North American Lutheran Church and the Anglican Church in North America – Feb. 13-15 in Orlando, Florida.

CORONAVIRUS UPDATE FROM NORTH AMERICAN LUTHERAN SEMINARY

Update from the North American Lutheran Seminary (NALS) in the days of coronavirus:

These past weeks have been times of uncertainty and anxiety. Like all of us, the students of the NALS struggle with the changes mandated by the current pandemic.

Classes continue, but they are taught online. Several students have family members or friends impacted by COVID-19.

Our students, faculty and staff continue to work together. We share prayer requests and meet online to support each other. All of us share in the disruption of life during these strange and stressful times.

As the North American Lutheran Seminary is located on the campus of Trinity School for Ministry, our response to the pandemic restrictions has been in direct line with the response of Trinity.

In every circumstance, the Gospel of Jesus Christ speaks words of comfort and hope. It is that Gospel which the students in the NALS are preparing to proclaim. The Gospel of God's love revealed to us in Jesus Christ is the power that saves us.

DAILY BIBLE READING GUIDE

A three-year plan of daily Bible readings is available on the NALC website.

The daily Bible readings may be downloaded as a printable calendar or electronic calendar. They may also be received as daily text messages. For more information go to thenalc.org/projects/daily-bible-readings.



SEMINARY UPDATE

REV. DR. ERIC RIESEN
NALS PRESIDENT

In the midst of these difficulties, I want to say thank you to all who continue to remember the seminary in your giving. Even in these trying times, the needs of the seminary also continue. Gifts like yours make certain that the students continue to meet and connect even if it's online. Your gifts also provide much needed scholarship support to ease the financial burden.

I would like to add thanks to all who remember the seminary and seminarians of the NALC in your prayers. Pray that the Holy Spirit would renew the Church and that our students would be part of that renewal. Pray for the health and well being of all those who are ill, and for the families who have lost loved ones.

CORONAVIRUS CONCERNS CANCEL CANADIAN ROCKIES THEOLOGICAL CONFERENCE

The 2020 Canadian Rockies Theological Conference has been cancelled because of travel restrictions set in place by the Canadian government in response to the coronavirus. Registration fees will be refunded.

The conference, sponsored by the Canadian Mission District of the NALC, was to be held April 21-24 in Canmore, Alberta.

Those with questions or concerns are encouraged to contact Pastor Karl Johnsen, one of the conference organizers, at pastorkjohnsen@gmail.com.

RESPONDING TO TENNESSEE TORNADOS

Seven deadly tornadoes cut a gash through Tennessee on March 3, leaving devastation unexpected and unimaginable in their wake.

The vicious storms unleashed winds up to 175 mph. They swept away homes and took away lives. They left a 100-mile scar from west to east — from Nashville through Cookeville, Tennessee. Twenty five people have died, including several children. Hundreds of buildings were destroyed.

NALC Disaster Response is on the ground with our congregation Reformation Lutheran Church from Hendersonville, Tennessee



(about 20 miles northeast of Nashville). Pastor Dean Eatman, volunteers from the Carolinas Mission District, Mary Bates, NALC Disaster Response coordinator, and team are serving hundreds in the impacted area.

Several members of Reformation Lutheran Church experienced damages to their homes. They live in the Mount Juliet area. Your prayers and support are needed!

Emergency relief supplies are being transported to our churches in Tennessee. Volunteers are needed.

Your help is needed! Please pray for those impacted by the storms. Bibles, quilts, school kits (four schools are 100 percent destroyed), health kits, and gift cards may be shipped or delivered to NALC Disaster Response, 810 Main Street, Caldwell, Ohio 43724.

Monetary donations may be given online at thenalc.org/donate or mailed to NALC Disaster Response; 2299 Palmer Drive, Suite 220; New Brighton, MN 55112.

For more information, contact Mary Bates at disasterresponse@thenalc.org or 740-509-1132.



CHERISH ONE ANOTHER, AS CHRIST DOES THE CHURCH

No one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, as Christ does the church.

— Ephesians 5:29 ESV

During this unprecedented time of “social distancing” due to the coronavirus, it seems clear that many families will be spending more time together than they are used to! Husbands and wives who may normally appreciate and value time apart, may now be together sunup to sundown. And how will that go for most married couples? On the one hand, it may draw couples and families closer together. On the other, it may strain further, already strained relationships. Living together in “forced isolation” may create discord in some households and marriages, leading to unkind thoughts and harsh words.

While serving two congregations in my 38 years of parish ministry, I was often troubled by the behavior of some husbands and wives toward each other. Spouses would snip and snipe at one another, speaking sarcastically, as if their behavior was modelled on TV sitcoms from the 1970s and 1980s.

It was so pronounced and seemed so often to create a toxic relationship in marriages, that I began to speak with couples in premarital preparation about St. Paul’s words in Ephesians 5:21-33. Perhaps these are helpful words to married couples at any time, but especially in these times.

The apostle begins by saying, “Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ.” He ends the instruction by saying, “This is a great mystery, and I mean in reference to Christ and the church; however, let each one of you love his wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband” (Ephesians 5:21, 32-33 RSVCE).

Paul is speaking, clearly, about the relationship between Christ, the Bridegroom and His bride, the Church. However, he is also pointing to this as a model for marriage. This passage from Paul is full of



MINISTRY MATTERS

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

meaning for wives and husbands, but I would summarize his message by telling couples preparing for marriage, “Always cherish one another. If you don’t cherish each other, no one else will!” I share the same message with my adult children and their spouses, hoping they will keep it in mind as they walk through life together. It is a helpful reminder to those of us living in close quarters at home during social distancing.

What better time in the church year and in our lives to consider God’s love for us and the Lord’s call for us to “love one another as I have loved you,” (John 15:12 ESV). We are called to love with a love that is sacrificial, self-giving and full of respect and care. It is not enough for pastors and congregations in the NALC to affirm marriage as between one man and one woman. We also need to uplift and encourage all in their marriages, supporting them and doing everything we can to strengthen these foundational relationships in church and society. Healthy marriages, nevertheless, begin with Christ and the way He nourishes and cherishes His bride, the Church.

What does it mean for husbands and wives to “cherish” one another, as Christ does the Church? The dictionary definitions include: “to protect and care for someone lovingly; to hold something or someone dear.” Every day, spouses might consider how they are “cherishing” one another — protecting and caring for one another lovingly; holding our

Continued on Page 19

spouse dear to our hearts. This would suggest laying aside sarcastic comments and barbs, speaking truthfully and straightforwardly to each other, guarding the door of our lips (Psalm 141:3), being careful (and care-full) in our thoughts and in our speech. Remember, in our world today, if husbands and wives don't cherish one another, no one else will!

And let us also note, if the pastor-congregation relationship is something of a "covenantal relationship" similar to marriage, then maybe it's helpful to encourage pastors and congregational members to also "nourish and cherish" one another. Most pastors in this time of COVID-19 are hard at work, seeking new ways to keep in touch with members, feed the flock and care for those who are

sick or in need. Yet it is all too common for pastors and members to forget to respect and care for one another, sometimes seeing each other as adversaries, or worse, enemies. The enemy is Satan, always doing his worst to try to divide and create chaos and dissension within the Body of Christ. Cherishing one another within the Body is one of the simplest ways that we can combat and overcome the devil who likes nothing more than to drive a wedge between pastor and people, husbands and wives.

As Christ cherishes His Church, let us nourish and cherish one another at all times, but especially now. In these challenging times, let us renew our relationships in Christ, whether husband and wife, parents and children, pastor and congregation. Let us protect and care for one another, let us hold each other dear, for Christ's sake.

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Please copy and share this newsletter widely.

YOUTH AND FAMILY MINISTRY

By Gary and Laurie Pecuch

It's April. The world has changed.

St. John's Lutheran Church in Grove City, Ohio, has developed an initial game plan for virtual ministry to young people. It has been posted on the "NALC Youth Workers" Facebook page and sent via email to their email distribution list. Feel free to email us at families@thenalc.org if you would like to receive the document.

Also, consider getting connected with the "NALC Youth Workers" Facebook page. Oodles of ideas have been shared on how to go about ministry to young people in our new reality.

Upcoming Webinars: We continue marching through the New Testament lessons. Click on the link below or catch us live on Facebook.

Tuesday, April 14, 2 p.m. (EDT)

https://us04web.zoom.us/rec/share/2I9pCbSszzNOc53o9WuDaLw4OZ-6X6a8hyEa_MMnkuF9MyEd8IzuveOZf1UMIj0



Remember that all webinars end up on the faithwebbing.com website as topical video clips.

We have started online cluster meetings. Contact us if you need the links.

The 2020 Nexus Institute: It's time to register for the all-NALC Nexus Institute July 12-17 at Grandview College in Des Moines, Iowa. The NALC week is over half full. Nexus is a week-long theological experience for high school students. It is a free opportunity with the only costs being travel to and from Des Moines, Iowa. For additional information go to nexusgv.org or grandview.edu/academics/other-programs/nexus.

Gary and Laurie Pecuch serve the NALC as youth ministry coaches. You may contact them at families@thenalc.org.

COVID - 19 resources & encouragement

- Bishop Selbo's Pastoral Letter and Triduum Messages
- Information on the CARES Act and Latest COVID-19 Updates from the U.S. and Canadian Governments
- NALC Live Stream Listing and Creative Resource Sharing
- Worship Resources such as Morning Prayer, Evening Prayer, Compline, Family Resources, Prayers, and Resources for the Triduum
- Communication & Technology Resources such as Liturgy and Music Licensing, Website Creation, Worship Service Recording and Live-Streaming, Sermon Publishing, Online Financial Giving, Meeting Options, Text and Email Messaging

www.thenalc.org/coronavirus