



BISHOP ADDRESSES SEXUAL IMMORALITY, ABORTION AT NALC LIFE CONFERENCE

Dear disciples of Christ Jesus,

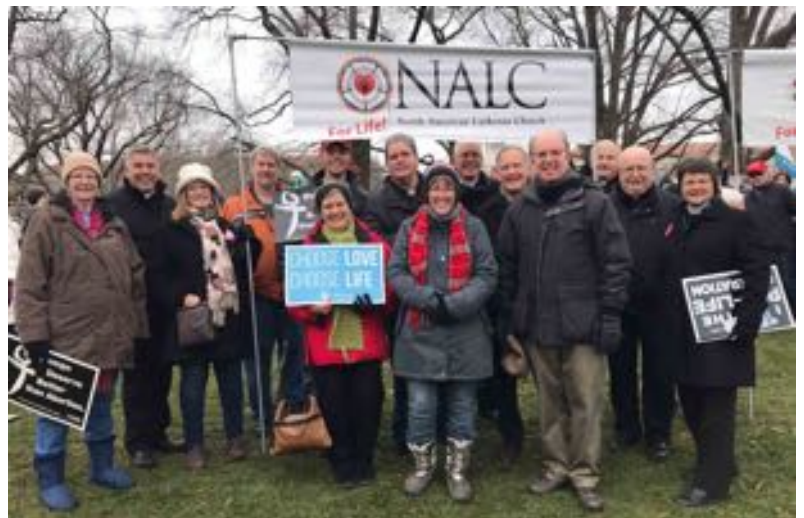
In the midst of the growing controversy regarding late-term abortion — and what can only be termed infanticide — as a matter of self-serving convenience in a culture celebrating such decisions while refusing to consider the consequences that undermine the sanctity of life and assert our capacity and “right” to “play God,” I thought it might be helpful to share my sermon from this year’s NALC Life Conference.

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

Paul’s words to the Corinthians and to us, not only in this reading (1 Corinthians 7:1-7) but his words about sexual immorality in chapter six, are difficult for us to accept in a culture where sexual promiscuity has become more the norm than the exception.

(Please take a moment to read 1 Corinthians 6 and 7.)

Paul reminds us that our bodies are a part of Christ’s own body. Outside of marriage, human sexuality is a form of prostitution. He quotes the Genesis text, “The two shall become one flesh.” Your actions are like uniting Christ with a prostitute. May it never be! “Whoever is united with the Lord is one with him in spirit.” Sexual sins are sins against your own body. “Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought with a price. Therefore honor God with your bodies.”



Leaders of the North American Lutheran Church and members of NALC congregations joined hundreds of thousands of marchers in the 2019 March for Life Friday, Jan. 18, in Washington, D.C. These marchers posed for this group photo prior to the march.

Paul reminds us that there is a spiritual side to human sexuality that is inescapable. Once you are in Christ any claim to autonomy is gone. It can never be a matter of “This is my body and I can do whatever I want with it. It is my choice.” Yes, you have the right, but not everything is beneficial or faithful in our relationships to Christ or others.

Paul’s words in this text are just as critical for our day as they were for his own. Human sexuality in marriage has its origin in creation. In Genesis 1 and 2, the equality of the sexes is affirmed, as both share in the image of God and in the responsibility for fruitfulness and the care of creation.

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People were created to be in community. God's answer to meet this need for community: "I will make a helper suitable for him." This helper was to be Adam's counterpart, companion, complement — a sexual partner with whom he was to become one flesh to consummate their love and to procreate children.

Genesis then describes a special work of creation. Out of the undifferentiated humanity of Adam male and female emerge. The sexes are differentiated. No matter what anyone else teaches there are just two — male and female. After Adam awoke from sleep and saw Eve, that perfect complement, he broke into a glorious love song. "This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh. She shall be called 'woman' for she was taken out of man."

This complementary nature of the sexes is the basis for heterosexual marriage. The creation narrative affirms our need for companionship. "It is not good for the man to be alone."

Since we are made in His image and God is love, we were created with the capacity to love and to be loved, to live in community rather than solitude. While Paul can affirm singleness as a good vocation for some, he does so without undermining the understanding of the created order. Paul understood this to be the exception and not the rule.

As Anglican evangelical scholar John Stott points out, "the complimentary nature of the anatomy of men and women is a symbol of a much deeper spiritual connection of the two becoming one in marriage. They were originally one. Then woman was taken out of man and they were separated from each other and in the sexual encounter of marriage they are reunited again as 'one flesh.'"

Paul describes this complimentary unity as not claiming authority over our own bodies but "yielding" our bodies for the sake of the other. In marriage there is a commitment to the mutual fulfillment of the other. This selfless giving is the nature of a loving community into which children are born, nurtured, mentored and mature in such love.

Paul also clearly acknowledges that in the midst of the beauty, power and attraction of human sexuality there is also the perfect opportunity for Satan's temptations to influence us in ways that are contrary to God's intended purposes.

There is much confusion today regarding sexuality and marriage as Satan continues to influence people in the direction of self-centeredness, self-realization and self-indulgence. Sexuality has become more about pleasing one's self and using another person to achieve that end than about love, commitment, relationships or marriage.

Our culture has attempted to justify self-serving behavior by norming mutually exploitive relationships. (You can use me for your satisfaction if I can use you for my satisfaction.) This is the nature of sexual immorality to which Paul is referring.

The net effect of these behaviors that have become valued in our culture of non-judgmental acceptance and tolerance is the continual growth of perverse sexual immorality that undermines marriage, family and a stable environment for children to be nurtured.

Just as moral behavior consistent with God's will leads to healthy relationships and fulfillment, immoral behavior contrary to God's will leads to broken relationships, a vacuum of selfishness, the destruction of human community and the senseless deaths of countless unborn children that were intended to be the fruit of selfless love in marriage.

Marriage is a gift and Paul points out that those who refrain from marriage also have a gift. But such a gift is not grounded in self-serving opportunities. The gift of remaining single is not a matter of being unwilling to share with others in order to keep more for one's self. Paul's life was just the opposite. His life apart from marriage was bound in the community of the Church providing him with the greatest flexibility for serving Christ and caring for many churches.

Martin Luther's words regarding this subject are helpful. Luther writes, "There are many reasons why people marry. Some marry for money and prosperity. Many people marry because of sheer immaturity, to

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seek sensual pleasure and satisfy it. Some marry to beget heirs. But St. Paul gives but this one reason, and I know of none fundamentally stronger and better, namely, **need**. Need commands it. Nature will express itself, bearing fruit and multiplying, and God does not want this outside marriage, and so everyone because of this need must enter into marriage if he wants to live with a good conscience and in favor with God. If this need were not there, all the other reasons taken together would make very poor marriages. This is particularly true of that smart immaturity which leads fools to take lightly such a serious, needful, godly estate; but it is not long until they realize what they have done to themselves.”

What is it that we have done to ourselves and continue to do? We cannot talk about the outrageous increase in the numbers of abortions without also talking about the sexual immorality that has produced so many unwanted pregnancies. Abortions are often an abominable attempt to cover the tracks of our immorality by committing murder.

Our concern for blending in with the culture by softening our approach regarding sexual immorality — and our failure to teach our children these solid biblical understandings — has only served to weaken our culture and contribute to the demise of the family, thereby fueling the growth of abortions as being tragic but unavoidable in such a culture.

I believe that we must understand and confess that behind both our immorality and the resulting abortions is our insatiable appetite to undermine the sovereignty of God and thereby undermine the sanctity of human life. It is the temptation of original sin to believe that we can know what God knows and if we have such information we can rely on our own wisdom and don't really need God at all. We long to make ourselves almighty and take God's power into our own hands. It seems obvious that there is no longer a Christian consensus regarding God's sovereignty as the author and giver of all life or the biblical understanding of human dignity.

The freedoms we have given ourselves have not made us more civilized but less. Have we become any less decadent than the Roman culture at its demise,



Some of the NALC participants in the 2019 March for Life pose outside of the U.S. Supreme Court building.

leaving unwanted babies exposed and left to die in the elements? Is placing them in a hospital incinerator more civilized than the trash heap? Is there any going back after legislating such immorality and incivility, to recapture the civility we have lost, to again acknowledge the sovereignty of God and a biblical view of human dignity?

There is only hope if we are willing to speak out, preaching and teaching in conformity with these biblical understandings, refusing to accept the cultural norms as the starting place for our life together and ministry. Growing up in the church during the 1960s and 70s, no one ever pointed to these biblical teachings of Jesus or Paul let alone lived in conformity with them. No one spent time connecting marriage to the created order. Many thought that being “relevant” was a matter of adapting to the new cultural norms of “sexual freedom” and independence from any norms except our own personal norms.

One of those biblical texts that provides a wonderful model for proclaiming the sanctity of life and the sovereignty of God is Psalm 139. It does so from beginning to end. First, the psalmist affirms the nature of creation. “You created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb”(v. 13). He refers to God the Father as a skilled artisan, a potter or a weaver. This is a mystery for which there can be only thanksgiving and praise for how we were formed in the womb. The growth of a child in the womb is neither haphazard nor automatic but a divine work of the creative hand of God.

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Second, the psalmist calls our attention to the consistency of God's involvement in our life. He observes, in the present, God's involvement in the past and is assured of God's guidance into the future. All of life from conception to death is in the hands of God. The psalmist realizes he has the same identity through it all, a person fashioned from the hands of God.

Finally, the psalmist points to an ongoing relationship that God initiates and sustains throughout the life of the faithful. The fetus — which means "offspring" in Latin — is neither a growth in the mother's body nor a "potential" human being, but a human life endowed with the fullness of humanity they already possess.

There are many other places in Scripture that give voice to this spiritual understanding of the preciousness and dignity of human life as well as the sovereignty of God. The question that remains is how often will we preach and teach about this Word of God and assist our people to struggle with how counter-cultural our faith is?

In preaching on the Gospel text of the Baptism of Jesus and the divine affirmation that concludes the reading, I made this point. Too often we seek outward affirmation from those around us. While there is nothing wrong with being liked or thought well of, there is a danger in putting too much value in the affirmation of others. As humans, we are relational beings and it is natural to want to connect with others — not only connect, but connect in a positive way. However, the issue is, do we allow our earthly connectedness to supersede our heavenly connectedness?

(Please forgive me for this all too familiar story.) During my last few years officiating high school and college sports, I was often given the task of working with less experienced officials as a mentor. Just before a highly competitive game, I was leading the pre-game discussion and the two rookie officials were nervous because they were being evaluated. I shared with them what one of my mentors said to me after my first high school game. His name was Sam DiBlasi.

Sam came into the locker room after the game. (I thought I had done a good job.) Sam said "Bradosky, lose the rabbit ears or get out of officiating. You are not there to please the fans. No matter what call you make, half the people are going to love you and half the people are going to hate you. And the next call you make the people that love you will hate you and the people that hate you will love you. If you have to have their affirmation to do your job, then get out of officiating now." He added, "There is only one opinion in the stands that really matters." In my naiveté I asked, "Who is that?" To which Sam replied, "Me, you fool! I understand why you are here and what you are supposed to do. It's only my evaluation that makes a difference."

I think Sam's words are important for any Church leader, lay or pastoral. Popularity is irrelevant; faithfulness to Christ is all that matters. His is the only opinion that ultimately matters, the only evaluation that has eternal significance.

We must face these important issues of sexual immorality and abortion with teaching that is faithful to God's Word. We must strengthen marriage and family, protecting all life and living more for our heavenly connection than any earthly one. We must remember that there is only one person in the stands whose opinion truly matters — Jesus Christ.

When God is pleased, nothing else matters. Paul writes in his letter to the Galatians, "In Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ."

St. Augustine points out that the words spoken to Jesus at Jordan are words for us to hear. They are addressed to us right now in this moment, "You are my son, you are my daughter, with you I am well-pleased. On you I have set my favor; through you I am doing what is my pleasure."

May we remain faithful and hear Jesus' words: "You are my beloved, in you I am pleased."

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

NALC LIFE CONFERENCE IN VIRGINIA PRECEDES ANNUAL MARCH FOR LIFE

The third annual NALC Life Conference was held on Thursday, Jan. 17, at Trinity Lutheran Church, in Warrenton, Va.

The event began with a free fellowship lunch followed by a talk by the Rev. Dr. Dennis Di Mauro, pastor of Trinity and chair of NALC Life Ministries, entitled "A Love for Life," which showed how Christianity has been, and is now, a pro-life faith. The talk included quotes from great Christian thinkers including Basil, Augustine, Aquinas, Luther, Calvin, Bonhoeffer and many others who spoke out in defense of life in the womb.



Some of the NALC participants at the National Prayer Service preceding the 2019 March for Life pose for a group photo.

The second speaker was Mona Fuerstenau, a disability advocate for over 30 years. A retired speech pathologist, parent of two very diverse young adults, champion of the marginalized and a lifelong Lutheran, she brings vast experience to her current role as director of ministry partnerships for Bethesda Lutheran Communities. She views most of life through an asset-based community development lens and firmly believes that all people have unique and necessary gifts and talents to share. She also provided free resources for equipping ministries to be life affirming for those with disabilities.

The keynote speaker was Melissa Ohden, the survivor of a failed saline infusion abortion. Believing she was less than five months pregnant with Melissa in 1977, her birthmother attempted to abort her. Miraculously, the abortion did not succeed in ending Melissa's life. Melissa's perspective as an abortion survivor who has had contact with numerous

members of her biological family, and as a mother herself, highlighted the intergenerational impact of abortion on families and communities. She believes that God had a plan for her when He saved her from the certain death of the abortion attempt.

The conference concluded with worship led by the Rev. Chris Porter of Advent Lutheran Church in Winchester, Va., and Lebanon Lutheran Church in Lebanon Church, Va., and a powerful sermon delivered by the Rev. John Bradosky, NALC bishop.

The next day, participants headed to Washington, D.C., to participate in the National Prayer Service at DAR Constitution Hall. The service was led by the Rev. Mitch Pacwa of EWTN (Roman Catholic TV network) who spoke on how diligent work overturned the laws that allowed slavery in the 19th century, and the same could take place in the pro-life moment if we stand up for life.

NOMINATIONS SOUGHT FOR POSITIONS TO BE ELECTED AT 2019 CONVOCATION

BISHOP, EXECUTIVE COUNCIL, COURT OF ADJUDICATION WILL BE ELECTED

The NALC Nominating Committee is seeking the names of candidates for nomination to serve in positions to be elected at the 2019 NALC Convocation Aug. 8-9 in Indianapolis, Ind.

The Convocation will elect a new NALC bishop as well as two members of the NALC Executive Council (one lay person and one pastor) and two members of the Court of Adjudication – all to four-year terms. Both pastors and lay members may be elected to the Court of Adjudication.

Brief descriptions of the duties of each position are available at thenalc.org/nominate2019.

Congregations are encouraged to nominate individuals for any of the open positions. Please confirm that individuals are willing and able to serve prior to submitting their names.

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 3. 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/nominate2019 and return it to the Nominating Committee.

Nominees will be asked to complete the Nominee Biographical Form (also available online) and to provide a photo for publication with the biographical information.

To prepare for the nomination and election process for bishop, the Executive Council provided a packet of information to congregations in August. The

packet includes a booklet of prayers encouraging NALC members to engage in a year of prayer and discernment leading up to the election.

The prayer booklet, nomination form and more information on the election process may be found online at thenalc.org/nominate2019.

Rosemary Johnson of Ladysmith, Wis., and Pastor Carl Rasmussen of Kirkland, Ill., are completing terms on the Executive Council. Both are eligible for reelection.

Carolyn Nestingen of St. Paul, Minn., and Pastor Marty Ramey of Dallas, N.C., are completing terms on the Court of Adjudication. Both are eligible for reelection.

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

LENTEN DEVOTIONS

The Rev. Paull Spring, bishop emeritus of the NALC, and the Rev. Dr. Gemechis Buba, assistant to the bishop for missions, have written Lenten devotions for the North American Lutheran Church.

The Lenten devotions will be available in several formats at thenalc.org/lent2019. The PDF format may be printed for individual reading or distribution by congregations.

The devotions will also be available in the NALC Walk of Faith app for Apple or Android devices.

You may sign up to receive each day's devotion as a text message or email. For instructions on how to sign up to receive the daily messages go to thenalc.org/lent2019.

SPEAKERS ARE ANNOUNCED FOR 2019 BRAATEN-BENNE LECTURES

The speakers have been announced for the 2019 Carl E. Braaten and Robert D. Benne Lectures in Theology. The annual theological conference, held during Lutheran Week, is Aug. 6-7 at The Westin Indianapolis in Indianapolis, Ind.

This year's lectures will focus on the work of the Holy Spirit under the Lutheran Week theme, "Walking by the Spirit with the Fruit of the Spirit."



Robert Benne

Dr. Robert Benne will address the Holy Spirit and Christian life. He was Jordan-Trexler Professor of Religion and chair of the Religion and Philosophy Department at Roanoke College in Salem, Va., for 18 years before he left full-time teaching in 2000. He founded the Roanoke College Center for Religion and Society in 1982 and served as its director until 2012. Upon his retirement, the college renamed the center in his honor. He is the author of several books including *Ordinary Saints: An Introduction to the Christian Life*; and *Good and Bad Ways to Think about Religion and Politics*.

Dr. Paul Hinlicky will explain how the Holy Spirit "disappeared in Lutheranism." Dr. Hinlicky is the Rev. J. Marshall Tise Professor of Lutheran Studies at Roanoke College. He is the author of several books including *Luther for Evangelicals: A Reintroduction*; *Beloved Community: Critical Dogmatics after Christendom* and *Divine Simplicity: Christ the Crisis of Metaphysics*.

Dr. Craig Keener will address the work of the Holy Spirit in the New Testament. He is the F. M. and Ada Thompson Professor of Biblical Studies at Asbury Theological Seminary in Wilmore, Ky. He is the author of 25 books including *Mind of the Spirit: Paul's Approach to Transformed Thinking* and *Spirit Hermeneutics: Reading Scripture in Light of Pentecost*. His *IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament* has sold more than half a million copies.

Dr. Matthew Levering will focus on the Holy Spirit and salvation. Dr. Levering holds the James N. and Mary D. Perry, Jr. Chair of Theology at the University of Saint Mary of the



Paul Hinlicky



Craig Keener



Matthew Levering



Derek Nelson

Lake in Mundelein, Ill. He is the author of more than 20 books including *Engaging the Doctrine of the Holy Spirit*; *Engaging the Doctrine of Revelation* and *Was the Reformation a Mistake?*

Dr. Derek Nelson will speak about the Holy Spirit and the stuff of life. He is Professor of Religion and Stephen S. Bowen Professor of the Liberal Arts, at Wabash College in Crawfordsville, Ind. He is the author or editor of 10 books including *A History of Christian Theology*; *Resilient Reformer: The Life and Thought of Martin Luther* and *Sin: A Guide for the Perplexed*. He and Dr. Hinlicky co-edited *The Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Martin Luther*.

CANADIAN ROCKIES THEOLOGICAL CONFERENCE TO FOCUS ON CATECHISM AS RESOURCE FOR LIFE AND WITNESS

The 2019 Canadian Rockies Theological Conference will be held April 30 through May 3 at the Coast Canmore Hotel and Conference Centre in Canmore, Alberta – just outside of Banff National Park.

This year's theme is "The World Following Christ: The Lutheran Catechism as a resource for life and witness in parish, home and beyond."

Featured speakers are the Rev. Larry Vogel and the Rev. Dr. Nathan Yoder.

Pastor Vogel will talk about how the catechisms may be used as a guide for following Jesus, as a devotional resource and as a tool for evangelism.

Pastor Yoder will explore the marks of Christian discipleship from a Lutheran perspective.

Pastor Vogel is the associate executive director of the Commission on Theology and Church Relations of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. He has been a pastor for 37 years. He recently served on the drafting committee for the 2017 edition of *Luther's Small Catechism with Explanation* from Concordia Publishing House.

Dr. Yoder is pastor of St. Martin's Evangelical Lutheran Church in Maiden, N.C., and the dean of the NALC's Carolinas Mission District. He also serves on the NALC Commission on Theology and Doctrine, the NALC Life-to-Life Discipleship Team and as adjunct faculty for the North American Lutheran Seminary.

The Conference is sponsored by the Canadian Mission District of the NALC.

All are welcome to attend. The conference is designed for both lay and clergy and includes free time for sightseeing in the beautiful Canadian Rocky Mountains.

Registration fee is \$350 (Canadian) including meals or \$250 without meals.



Larry Vogel



Nathan Yoder

More information on the conference is available in the Canadian Rockies Theological Conference group on Facebook or by contacting the organizers Pastor Karl Johnsen at pastorkjohnsen@gmail.com or Pastor Phil Gagnon at pphil1961@icloud.com.

NALC YOUTH GATHERING IN CANADA IS MAY 17-20

The Canadian Mission District is hosting an NALC Youth Gathering May 17-20 at LCBI High School and Bethlehem Lutheran Church in Outlook, Saskatchewan.

The theme of the gathering is "Love Large."

Keynote speaker is Gary Pecuch, youth ministry coach for the NALC.

The event will feature worship, music, mission, and "Larger than Life" games.

For more information contact organizers at nalccanadayouth@gmail.com.

LUTHERAN CORE TO HOST “REKINDLE YOUR FIRST LOVE” EVENT FOR PASTORS

Lutheran CORE (Coalition for Renewal) will host a “Rekindle Your First Love” gathering for pastors on Wednesday, May 1, at Trinity Lutheran Church in Warrenton, Va.



Wendy Berthelsen



Tim Hubert



Brian Hughes



Craig Moorman

Organizers describe the event as “a full day of spiritual and emotional renewal for pastors.” It will include presentations, processing, prayer, fellowship, worship and personal ministry time.

Pastor Tim Hubert will talk about “Rekindling Your First Love for Christ.” Describing himself as “someone who continually needs to return to Jesus,” Pastor Hubert has been a pastor for more than 35 years. During the last 12 years he has served as an intentional interim pastor for severely conflicted congregations. He tells interim congregations to look for a pastor who loves Jesus first and them second. Pastor Hubert said, “This is a time to experience His love through prayer, song, and conversation. This is a time for the Holy Spirit to heal our souls so we can continue to be a blessing to others.”

Pastor Wendy Berthelsen will speak on “Rekindling Your First Love for the Church as the Body of Christ.” Pastor Berthelsen has served through the highs and lows of ministry for 26 years, 13 of those years as a pastor. She has worked with her pastor-husband at Hope Lutheran Church in Cedar Hill, Texas, and currently serves as interim pastor for the Lutheran Church of the Risen Lord in Odessa, Texas. She is co-founder of Call Inc., a non-profit teaching mission dedicated to mobilizing ordinary people “called” by Jesus to “incorporate” His call into all of life.

Pastor Brian Hughes will address “Rekindling Your First Love for Mission and Ministry as the Work of Christ in the World.” Pastor Hughes has served churches in several places, including for the last 16 years in Columbia, Md. He has a doctorate in family systems theory. He will lead pastors in exploring a tool known as “the landscape of life,” exploring how each of us has been uniquely shaped to hear the Gospel and what Jesus wants us to do with it. He loves to ride his Harley and explore the ocean depths in his personal submarine.

Pastor Craig Moorman will help pastors identify personal takeaways from their time together and develop them into a realistic plan for implementation. He hopes that pastors will leave the gathering renewed – rekindled and on fire – and reestablished in their first love for Jesus Christ, His Church and the mission of Christ. Pastor Moorman has served congregations in Maryland for 32 years both as a pastor and mission developer. He currently serves in both capacities – as a mission developer in Mount Airy, Md., and as an interim pastor in Dundalk, Md. He was also part of the start-up mission team for the NALC.

More information on the gathering is available at lutherancore.website/rekindle.

PONDERING EPIPHANY WITH LUTHER

Dear Disciples of Jesus,

We begin our Epiphany season with the journey of the Wise Men seeking Jesus, consulting the Scripture and thwarting Herod's plan to destroy Jesus. Each year I read one of Martin Luther's best sermons for Epiphany. Here is an excerpt from his sermon:

Let us then observe how these Wise Men took no offense at the mean estate of the Babe and his parents, that we may also not be offended in the mean estate of our neighbor, but rather see Christ in him, since the Kingdom of Christ is to be found among the lowly and the despised in persecution, misery, and the holy cross. Those who seek Christ anywhere else find him not. The Wise Men discovered him not at Herod's court, not with the high priests, not in the great city of Jerusalem, but in Bethlehem, in the stable, with lowly folk, with Mary and Joseph. In a word, they found him where one would have least expected. They presented him with gifts: gold, and frankincense, and myrrh. Incense is a live confession, full of faith, by which we offer all that we have and are to God. ... The gift of our gold is that we should confess Christ asking, laying aside our own esteem and the dictates of our reason and good intentions, that we should present ourselves as foolish, naked and ready to be ruled. Obedient children gladly accept their King and bring all into submission to Christ. ... Thus, we see that incense is faith and gold is hope, because faith believes that all things are and ought to be of God, and hope accepts and sustains what faith believes. The myrrh is love. Faith takes us from ourselves, that we should refer everything to God with praise and gratitude. Hope fills us with the concerns of others, that we may endure all in patience without resentment. Love reduces us to that nothing which we were in the beginning, so that we desire neither goods nor anything outside of God, but simply that we should commit ourselves truly to His good pleasure. This is the way of the cross by which we come most speedily into life. We can present our gifts in the same way as the Lord says: "Inasmuch as you have done it to one of the least of these my brethren, you have done it to me." Those who give of their goods to help the poor, to send children to school, to educate them in God's Word and other arts that we may have good ministers – they are giving to the baby Jesus.



FROM THE BISHOP

REV. JOHN BRADOSKY
BISHOP

It is easy to focus on the diligent seeking of the Wise Men and forget that they were being led by the star. It wasn't their individual wisdom or collective wisdom that turned them to Bethlehem, but the Word of God. Even the gifts they brought were not their own but the possession of Christ from the beginning of creation.

Moreover, I was reminded that we do not have to go looking for Christ – Christ has entered our world looking for us! He has entered our world and our lives with His amazing grace to pursue us, forgive us, redeem us and give us eternal life. The three Wise Men may well represent the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. No matter our status, position or wealth, we are nothing more than a baby "of mean estate." Christ enters our lives to give us the most precious gifts – as Luther identifies them: faith (incense), hope (gold) and love (myrrh).

What Luther describes in the use of those gifts is nothing more than the life of discipleship, following Jesus. Incense is the confession of the faith, offering all we have and are to Christ and His mission. Gold is also confession in the form of turning from our selfish desires and placing ourselves under His Lordship, obedient to His commands. Myrrh is His overwhelming love for us that reduces us to nothing so that we might be filled with everything that comes from Him.

All of those gifts are to be turned outward in the direction of our neighbor to offer them what we ourselves have received: faith, hope and love – faith in Jesus, hope in all His promises and His boundless

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love for us in His crucifixion and resurrection. Following Jesus means passing on to others, in full measure, all that we have received.

The season of Epiphany is about the Light that banishes the darkness. Yet we live in a world that loves the darkness more than the Light. King Herod was only the first to find the Incarnation offensive. His sense of fear and self-preservation at all cost — including the death of his own sons and the countless infants from Bethlehem — epitomizes the darkness of our world and the depravity of evil.

Our own lust for power and our feeble attempts to undermine God's sovereignty, coupled with the inhumanity of countless abortions, should cause us to see the darkness in our own lives and in this world. Our world is not much different than the one the Wise Men encountered, nor the one Jesus experienced, nor the one His disciples faced.

People who love the darkness are not offended by the Incarnation because of the day off, family gatherings, a big feast, the exchange of gifts, but the message of Christmas. The angel's words to Joseph are extremely troubling: "She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins" (*Matthew 1:21 NIV*).

It's the talk of a Savior that people find offensive. It's the talk of sin and the need for forgiveness. It's the proclamation of the Savior and the insistence of Christ Himself that He is the Way, the Truth and the Life — the only way by which people may come to the Father.

Many seem to be not only opposed to the meaning of Christmas but offended by the truth proclaimed in the Christmas Gospel: that Jesus is the King of kings, the Lord of lords and He will reign forever and ever. It is the profound truth that we need a Savior that the self-sufficient, who believe that there is no sin or evil and that we can save ourselves, find so revolting.

While we consider these texts of the Epiphany season, it is important to remember that the light does not come from a secondary source that exposes



the truth about Jesus. Rather, Jesus is the Light! He is the Light of the World!

Jesus is revealing Himself. He wants us to know who He is! He comes to us as a baby, not to withdraw into obscurity and leave us with deficient information and confusion concerning His identity, nature and mission. He comes that we might know Him! Faith is a relationship with Christ such that our entire identity is in Him.

All too often we accept the cheap substitutes for this life-giving relationship of faith. We believe in some information about Jesus. We know theologically sound doctrines about Jesus. We may even practice spiritual disciplines. All of that can reflect a religious life, without necessarily knowing the person Jesus Christ. Information, theology, doctrine and disciplines are all good but never a substitute for a relationship with the one Lord, Jesus Christ. He is the

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UPDATE FROM DIDI PANZO

NALC GLOBAL WORKER IN DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO

Teach me to do your will, for you are my God! Let your good Spirit lead me on level ground! – Psalm 143:10 (ESV)

Dear partners in mission,

We thank you for your prayers, donations of kindness and your thoughts that allow us to survive on the ground. We also thank God, the sustainer and protector of our lives. He is the one who used each of you to be faithful and helpful in our mission in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). With God and you, we were able to accomplish tasks that we felt were impossible.

The year 2018 was very challenging and discouraging because of the political situation in the DRC – unrest, strikes, killings and other situations that could have caused us to resign and return home. God was so good and present in the battle and through your prayers. Because of Him, we won the battle. The tough time was turned into a blessing. Here are some of the year's accomplishments in our established programs:

Seminars: Men and women were blessed by trainings that helped them to discover their talents and capacity to serve God. Some of the themes we considered were a man's responsibilities in a family,



Photos by Pastor Paul Gossman, executive director of World Mission Prayer League.

discipleship, empowering women to witness to the Gospel with other women, women standing for the construction of our homes, families, communities, churches and nation. We recently discussed the role of men as the head of the household. Many other topics were discussed that led the participants to discover Christ and accept Him as Master and Savior of their lives.

Church Development: A Community of Confessional Lutheran Churches in Congo (CELCCO) church, built by natives, struggled to develop and increase their attendance. Through motivation, training and seminars, the church of Boma, Matadi and Tshela had an attendance increase of 15 percent over previous years. Our theological seminary now has more than 35 Lutheran students who in three years will become leaders of the local church and on the national level.

Assistance to orphans, children in need and women in domestic violence situations: During 2018, we cared for 25 children who lived at an orphanage owned by an individual who lacks the means to fully care for the children. We assisted by providing food three times a week. We also helped to feed and pay school tuition for 10 children who live on the streets

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or in impoverished households. We counseled 45 women, many of whom are now out of the program with successful changes in their lives and the knowledge that Christ is their Provider, Protector and Savior.

Help to farmers: We find that farming plays a crucial role in helping families to generate income. In many of the small villages we visited, we noticed that women were often separated from men for farming. It was our job to show them that God is their Provider. They must put Him at the center of their household, work and lives, praying together and sharing the Word of God with their children. Through that, any crops they may harvest will help their family and not just the men. We helped to provide tools and seeds. Today at least 40 percent of the families we are working with have already noticed a difference in their income and are able to feed and pay school tuition for their children.

Theological training: In the initial days of the CELCCO, a lack of trained pastors with understandable theologies led the church to division. The way to strengthen the church was to only have trained pastors who would be able to faithfully preach the Gospel. With that in mind, the theological school was created in the city of Tshela. The school still struggles to fulfill its financial goals. Besides my other duties, I was called to teach at that school and I am currently serving as the general director. This year, 65 students are enrolled, of which 30 are finishing their associate degree and will be enrolled



again next year, as we are projecting the introduction of a bachelor's level program.

Visits: We were blessed by the visit of our brothers and sisters from the United States. Between the months of February and March, our son Enoque Panzo and his wife Anna Panzo visited us for two weeks. They visited to see where we live and the kind of mission work we do. While they were here, they spent time with the youth of the CELCCO and led seminars on how to become useful in the church and how to lead with a vision for the future.

We also received Dr. William Obaga, World Mission Prayer League (WMPL) associate director for Africa. His visit boosted the mission mindset of the church. We visited different projects, mission sites and the theological school. His visit served as preparation for the visit of the Rev. Dr. Paul Gossman, WMPL executive director.

In the month of September, we received a visit from Pastor Gossman and Gloria Sauk, our colleague in Kenya. Both came to learn what is happening on the west side of the DRC and discovered the tremendous opportunities for partnership between WMPL and the CELCCO. We also visited the city of Tshela, where the theological school exists and where the history of the church began. We visited the city of Kuakua, where Gloria is planning to promote a vision camp because of the high rate of blindness on the west side of the Kongo Central Province. We toured the city of Boma and visited some independent projects and organizations that are our partners. In



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Boma, it amazed our visitors to see that the roof of the church that was totally ripped off was replaced through help from our supporters in North America.

In summary, these visits brought a new perspective of cooperation and allowed us to together praise the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Again, let us remind you that through God's help and because of you and your faithful work, prayers and giving, all these programs were able to happen. Please continue to pray for the mission work in the DRC, pray for provision to help fulfill most of the needs of each program and pray for this country that is going through a presidential election. Finally, pray for our protection and provision to continue to stand firm on the ground.



To learn more about our global workers with WMPL or to partner with the Panzo Family, please visit thenalc.org/gcs.

FROM THE BISHOP

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totality of the call to discipleship. Jesus says, "Follow me!"

This season of Epiphany is so important as the Church identifies clearly who Jesus is. We are all taught not to follow a stranger, but this One who entered our world and our lives in Holy Baptism, who comes to us every time we open His Word and who enters our lives again and again with His real presence at the celebration of Holy Communion, wants us to know Him, to be formed by Him, to follow Him, not as a stranger but as the Good Shepherd who has laid down His life for His sheep.

As we learn all that the Scripture reveals about Jesus, the Light of the World, who He is and all that He has done for you and me, the darkness of uncertainty gives way to confident obedience. The response of becoming an obedient disciple of Jesus is not some strange quest, but the only joyful response possible.

I would be remiss to end this letter regarding the season of Epiphany and Luther's exposition regarding the faithfulness of the Wise Men without reminding you that God's Word was the most important contributing factor to the successful completion of their journey.

The true nature of faith is that they held fast to the Word. Faith pays no regard to what it sees and feels, but clings only to the Word. The Wise Men were cast down and offended ... they passed through a difficult struggle and because they believed the Word, God sent the star even closer to be their guide. ... After a spiritual struggle, God is so heartfelt, so near and clear, that not only does a person forget the anguish and the struggle, but they are even more endeared to Him.

So, let us not only cling to the Word but love our neighbor enough to boldly share the truth of Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh, letting His own light reveal Himself to them. Let us recommit ourselves to faithfully responding to His mission of being His disciples and making disciples of all nations.

May the One who banishes the darkness fill you with His light!

Bishop John Bradosky

VICTORY MINISTRY IN LIBERIA

By Pastor Samar Ghandour

The people in Liberia and Victory Ministry send you greetings in the name of Christ. They continue to be grateful for your faithful and continuous prayers, support and desire to see the Lord work in Liberia and other West African countries.

New churches in the Victory Ministry Family: The Lord continues to use us to do His work in West Africa. By His grace we have been able to start churches in Gwenny Town, Henry Town, Bong Village, Wangeko and Barnor.

We were hoping that the Nedowen church would be started, but we were not successful. The preliminary work was done but the church-planting phase was not successful. We gave the situation to God and continue to look for His direction.

Preliminary work is being carried out for church-planting in Brewerville. Please pray for the team and other assistants in the process. This is a larger and more connected city. Initial identification of two towns is being done for Gbapolu and other places. We are praying for a successful early conversation with the leadership in these towns.

Teaching and Baptism: We attended the Region 1 convocation. We were there to provide doctrinal clarity and leadership education on biblical teaching. We were fortunate to be able to baptize 15 people at the convocation.

Land purchases: We negotiated and paid for church land in Kormah, Gwenney Town, Gbesseh, Nyanla and Bongoma. This will enable the churches to build their own structures and not rely on homes and other public facilities – where they are constantly being driven out. The Bongoma church has been built, but the cost of the land has only been partially paid.

Micro projectors: We continue to provide micro projectors for evangelism in the village areas. We have provided Regions 2 and 4 with one projector each. These projectors, when charged, will run for



two hours, enough time to complete the full run of the “Jesus” film. When connected to a battery-run speaker system, it provides enough sound for a crowd of 500 people. This eliminates the need to travel with a bulky projector and generator. It eases travel cost and storage. The projectors are portable and easy to use and one of our most effective evangelism tools to date. They help us show the “Jesus” film in local languages with very great lip synchronization. We are trying to provide more projectors to different sections of the country at a cost of \$160 to \$200 each.

Construction and developments: Financial assistance was provided to the Gbesseh and Nyanla churches to help them purchase initial materials for bricks and transportation of sand, gravel and other local materials needed for church construction. The two churches also received assistance for the purchase of materials and tools for land clearing.

Financial assistance was provided to the Kakata and Tienii churches to purchase bricks and crushed rock. The Tienii church still has over 1,300 bricks to

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transport to the construction site. The Kakata church will use the bricks for the expansion of the edifice. The Tienii church finances will be used for the purchasing and hauling of additional bricks in preparation for the construction of the edifice.

The church at Barclay Farm was given \$1,000 for the continuation of brick production in preparation for the raising of exterior walls. The church is currently working on raising an additional \$1,000 for transportation, cement, bricks, hauling of sand and a partial payment toward the compensation of the contractor.

Cement was provided for the plastering of the Nagbena kindergarten and elementary school. The plastering will prevent the exterior walls of the building from being washed away by heavy tropical rain splashing on them. Some of the cement was used to cast the floors of classrooms to prevent dust from billowing into the children's faces.

Chairs: A total of 28 chairs were provided for the 14th Street church. Additional chairs may be needed as attendance increases.

Bible college: The Bible college process is moving along smoothly. The catalog and curriculum are being



written. It's likely that the school will open by May 2019. It's exciting that many Victory Ministry pastors are willing to serve as the initial students. There is a great eagerness to learn to be an effective pastor. We may have more than the 10 anticipated initial students.

Based on the caliber of teachers and the curriculum, this school will be one of the best in the country from the start. With the minimum facility and resources, we are trusting God to strengthen the students, school and faculty to provide a sound and spiritual education for the future pastors, evangelists and missionaries.

Medical Assistance: We continue to provide financial assistance for sick pastors, their sick wives and young children who are unable to underwrite the cost of their medical needs, as well as pay tuition for needy students.

Motorcycle: Due to the rise in the number of churches in Region 4, Victory Ministry provided a motor bike for the region's use. The motor bike will help the dean travel to the churches and provide supervision, education, training and pastoral care.



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RESOURCES FROM NALC MISSION OFFICE

The mission of the Church is to preach the Gospel and to make disciples for Christ. Making disciples – in our congregations, in our communities and nations and around the world – must be a priority of the Church in the present age.

The NALC mission office has a primary focus of mobilizing congregations, leaders and mission districts for mission. To achieve this, systematic organization is critically important. It is vital that we continue to work in the following five categories in order to mobilize the whole denomination: new mission starts, congregational renewal, international mission, the Great Commission Society and multi-national mission.

As we continue to equip and resource our mission districts and congregations, we want to share some of our updated resources:

A Future of Hope: The Small and Rural Church, a new Bible study resource and video series from Pastor Brad Hales. To connect, please visit: thenalc.org/futureofhope.

Mission District Mission Team Resources: Extended versions of resources compiled from various training events and conferences over the last four years are available at thenalc.org/mdm.

The Academy: Each month we host a free webinar based on expressed needs by NALC leaders for NALC leaders. The webinars are offered on the first Tuesday of each month at 11 am ET. For additional details or to view past sessions, please visit: thenalc.org/theacademy.

New Mission Start? Are there congregations in your mission district that are considering a new start? Join Pastor Brad Hales for a Q & A session on Thursday, Feb. 28, at 7 p.m. ET. To connect go to global.gotomeeting.com/join/602199437. For additional resources please visit thenalc.org/2018-mission-start-update.

Resources for Prayer: Pastor Brad Hales has written a new resource entitled, *Prayer – The Fuel for Mission*. To access the resource go to thenalc.org/prayer-fuel-for-mission. As we endeavor to continue to be a people of prayer, a digital prayer calendar is a free resource available to all in the NALC at thenalc.org/prayercalendar.

Mission Driven Updates: For additional updates, with stories from across the NALC, please visit missions.nalcnetwork.com.

VICTORY MINISTRY

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In the future, it will help with church planting, especially executing preliminary tasks before the next team arrives.

With the potential of this region, it's likely that it may need another bike to help them be more effective. Regions 1 and 2 may also need a bike.

Requests: Please continue to pray for us. We still have many tasks to complete: plant five churches, start the Bible college, recruit students, pay teachers at the Bible college, provide three more motor bikes, maintain the car we use here (something that has to be done every other day due to the very bad roads we travel), purchase gasoline (a very expensive commodity), free the container from the port, supervise the 2019 convocation, conduct the pastoral and leadership discipleship conference, and seek to establish ecumenical relationships here and internationally. We need the Lord's wisdom for all these things. We need the Holy Spirit's guidance and anointing. We want the Lord to be glorified in what we do.

Thanks, and may God continue to bless you.

To learn more, or to partner with Pastor Samar Ghandour and Victory Ministry, please visit thenalc.org/gcs.

LUTHERAN WORLD RELIEF AND IMA WORLD HEALTH COMBINE OPERATIONS

International humanitarian organizations Lutheran World Relief and IMA World Health are combining operations to dramatically increase their impact on breaking the cycle of poverty and promoting healthier families and communities throughout the world.

Lutheran World Relief, based in Baltimore, Md., and IMA World Health, a faith-based public health agency headquartered in Washington, D.C., integrated Jan. 1 with a single CEO, leadership team and staff, and identical boards of directors. The combined organization mobilizes a joint staff of 550 people in 21 countries around the world.

Ambassador Daniel V. Speckhard, president and CEO of Lutheran World Relief, will lead the unified organization. Rick Santos, who served as CEO at IMA World Health for the past nine years, will serve as a senior advisor for the transition.

The move is a natural evolution for Lutheran World Relief and IMA World Health, which have worked together for more than half a century.

IMA World Health was founded in 1960 by a coalition of faith-based organizations, including Lutheran World Relief, to provide medical supplies to the world's poorest populations. IMA stands for Interchurch Medical Assistance. Over the years, IMA World Health has provided \$75 million in medical-related materials to Lutheran programs and has become a comprehensive public health agency.

In addition to ongoing work serving more than 35 million people around the world, the combined agency is expanding programs to improve water and sanitation and thwart cholera in Haiti, prevent the spread of Ebola along the Ugandan-Congolese border, and provide treatment for pediatric and cervical cancer in Tanzania.

The two organizations' financial strength and complementary work in public health, rural



livelihoods and emergency relief greatly extends the unified agency's reach throughout the world.

"We're making this historic move to better serve the world's most vulnerable communities," he said. "We will have a much greater impact together than we ever could have apart in the goal of ending extreme poverty and hunger and building healthy communities."

Lutheran World Relief is a Ministry Partner of the NALC. For more information on LWR, go to lwr.org.

LWR PROJECTS FOR LENT, PALM SUNDAY

Partner with Lutheran World Relief this Lent and energize your congregation for global good. This is an opportunity to show your congregation the impact they can make in the lives of poor and struggling families around the world.

Visit lwr.org/lent to learn about Lenten projects for congregations to give, assemble, worship and pray with LWR and those it serves this Lent.

Visit lwr.org/eco-palms to order palm branches for your Palm Sunday celebrations that help harvesting communities rise out of poverty and sustain the land they depend on for survival.

THE WORD MADE FLESH

And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father. — John 1:14 (RSV)

I do realize Christmas has come and gone, and we are now in the Season of Epiphany. Still, maybe you're with me, where I am — not quite ready to let go of "the Word made flesh to dwell among us!"

Did you know there is a Facebook page titled, "Christmas Junkies?" Obviously, it's for those who love all things Christmas — even, and especially, the kitschy, glitzy, shiny aspects of Christmas! While I won't classify myself as a Christmas junkie, I will admit I look forward to the season and appreciate that the Church, in her wisdom, gives us more than just one day of Christmas, but a season, albeit brief.

I would describe myself more as an "Incarnation junkie." I love Christmas and our observance of the birth of our Savior, Jesus Christ. I love preaching on the miracle of the virgin birth, the visit of the angel, the lowly shepherds on the Judean hills, the babe lying in a manger — a feed trough in Bethlehem, which means, "House of Bread."

But more than that, I love the fact that God became human, in Jesus, to be the one and only Savior and Redeemer of the world. I love the fact that God's divine Word became flesh — to dwell among us!

It's not that I keep Christmas decorations up year-round, but I am always mindful that redemption wouldn't have been possible without the Incarnation. We do well to keep the miracle of God-become-flesh in our thoughts and in our hearts year-round, that we never forget or ignore, as Martin Luther said, that "the manger and the cross are never far apart," as quoted in Roland Bainton's *Martin Luther's Christmas Book*.

Luther writes in his essay, *On the Councils and the Church* (quoted in the *Solid Declaration of the Formula of Concord*):



MINISTRY MATTERS

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

We Christians must know that unless God is in the balance and throws in weight as a counterbalance, we shall sink to the bottom with our scale. I mean that this way: If it is not true that God died for us, but only a man died, we are lost. But if God's death and God dead, lie in the opposite scale, then his side goes down and we go upward like a light and empty pan. ... But he could never have sat in the pan unless he had become a man like us, so that it could be said: God dead, God's Passion, God's blood, God's death. According to his nature God cannot die, but since God and man are united in one person, it is correct to talk about God's death when that man dies who is one thing or one person with God. (The Book of Concord, Tappert, ed., page 599)

It is worth mentioning this now, as we are past the Christmas season, into Epiphany, with Lent and Easter soon to follow! In Lutheranism, we do well at celebrating Christmas, together with much of the rest of the world. But it seems we pack up the miracle and mystery of the Incarnation and place it in a box to be stored until the next December!

Luther would not have it this way! Luther kept the meaning of God-become-human close at hand whenever speaking of the suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus. He always affirmed that you cannot have one without the other. So we do well, also, to keep these two together in our Lutheran preaching, teaching and ministry.

It is no surprise that many of our congregations wrestle with decline — often blaming nearby "evangelical" or "mega-churches" which are thought

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to draw longtime Lutherans away to more dynamic, exciting, well-produced Sunday worship/entertainment. If that is the case (and I'm not convinced that it is) then the most effective counter to the mega-church phenomenon and the greater temptation for Lutherans to be drawn away from worship by golf, fishing, bed, breakfast and youth sports is a renewed commitment to the miracle of the incarnation and the passion, death and resurrection of Jesus.

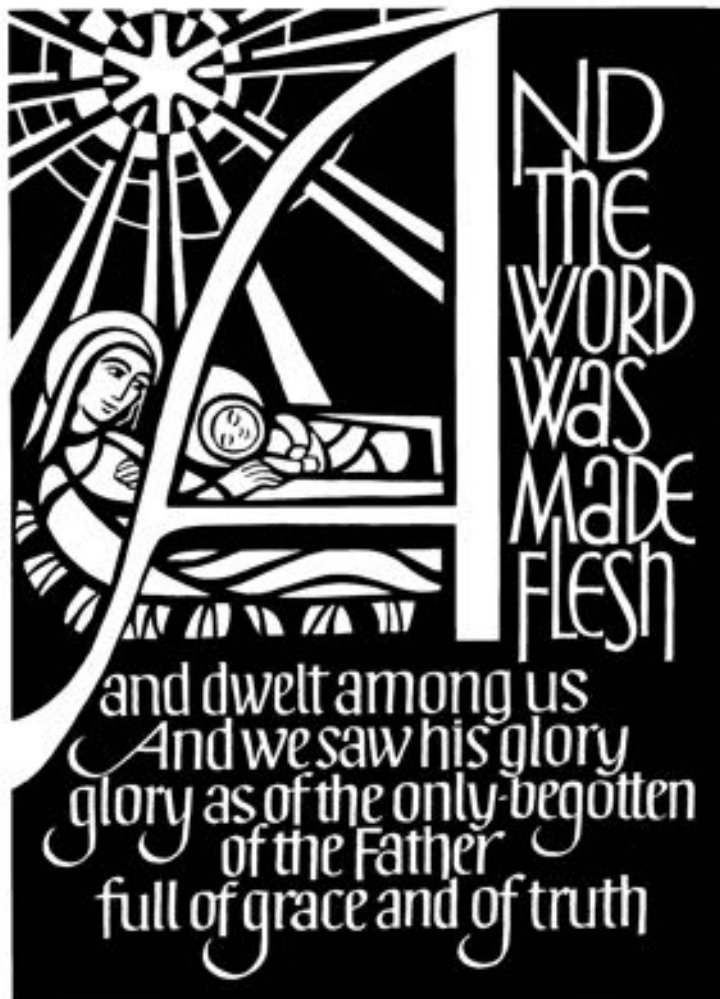
In our every sermon, worship service, relationship and ministry opportunity, we will distinguish ourselves from many other Christians when we focus on how God came in the flesh to dwell among us, here and now.

This is one of the things we Lutherans, in our understanding of Scripture, get right — that the manger and the cross are never far apart! The Incarnation — God become flesh — is essential to our redemption! But even more, the Incarnation is not something that happened that first Christmas Eve, and never again, but God in Jesus Christ continues to dwell among us — in the flesh, embodied, to be with us always — and not just in some spiritualized, ethereal way!

Truly, this is why St. John wrote his Gospel — and in such a different manner! At the time John was writing, Matthew's and Luke's accounts of the birth of Jesus already existed. The faithful already had some knowledge of Mary and Joseph, the visits of the angel, and the conception by the Holy Spirit. John evidently felt no need to write yet another biographical description of the birth of the Christ child.

Rather, John wanted to help the faithful to *understand* the birth of the Christ child. John wanted to provide the Church with a theological reflection on Emmanuel — God-with-us, the Living Bread come down from heaven.

So John begins his Gospel, not with Mary and Joseph, but with God and God's Word — God's mind, will and intellect, which was with God in the beginning and was co-creator of all that exists but then humbled Himself, subordinated Himself to the Father's will to become



one with the creation, to enter into His creation to be, not a distant, far-off, foreign God, but to be a God who would dwell with His creation — to be here with us, not just figuratively or spiritually, but literally, in the flesh, to walk with us, talk with us, guide and protect us.

That's what is meant by "incarnation" — by God incarnating Himself to be God with us — not just 2,000 years ago in Bethlehem, but again and again, in Word and Sacrament to be present *with* us and *for* us and *in* us, to be our ever-present Savior.

And that's what many Christians (and some Lutherans) have a hard time understanding. This is why Lutheranism and each Lutheran congregation can distinguish itself from other traditions and congregations by lifting up and focusing on our incarnate God in Jesus Christ every Sunday!

How do we do that?

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First, make both Word and Sacrament — the means through which God provides His presence in Jesus Christ — available at least weekly. As the Holy Spirit works through the Word, written, read and preached, the Living Bread comes down from heaven to give life to us and to the world. The Holy Spirit also works through the Word, making Christ truly present in the bread and wine of the Lord's Supper, which become His body and blood.

Lutherans have had a long history of elevating the reading of the Word and preaching of the sermon as essential at most every worship service. We have not always recognized the importance of the Lord's Supper. We view it as "special" in some way, but we have not always understood why it is to be as regular as daily bread.

When we receive Holy Communion, we are eating and drinking the very presence of Jesus Christ, crucified and risen. When we receive Holy Communion, St. Paul affirms that we are receiving, participating in, communing with the very body and blood of the Lord. He becomes one with us and we with Him (1 Corinthians 10:16).

About the Lord's Supper, Luther writes in the Small Catechism, "Instituted by Christ himself, it is the true body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, under the bread and wine, given to us Christians to eat and drink."

He explains the benefit of receiving the Sacrament, saying, "We are told in the words 'for you' and 'for the forgiveness of sins.' By these words the forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation are given to us in the sacrament, for where there is forgiveness of sins, there are also life and salvation." The Lutheran Confessions state that we have the Lord's Supper every Sunday and often during the week on other festivals (*Apology of the Augsburg Confession, Article 24*).

If, through Christ's incarnate presence in the Sacrament of the Altar, worshipers are given, as a gift, "forgiveness of sins, life and salvation," why would we not provide this gift every time the congregation gathers? Why would we not point to Christ's incarnate presence in the Lord's Supper,

together with His presence in the Word? Why would Lutherans not point to this as one important, significant way that we are distinct from Protestant non-sacramental churches which do not recognize and celebrate the incarnation in Word and Sacrament? First, let us in the North American Lutheran Church be marked, as much as possible, by Word and Sacrament each and every Sunday!

Second, let us be known by an incarnational theology. In simpler terms, let us take seriously the fact that Christ comes to us embodied, incarnate in Word and Sacrament — honoring His presence, welcoming Him, respecting the reality of Jesus Christ dwelling among us, not in some vague, abstract way, but concretely, physically, so that we know where and how we may find Him!

Many Christians do not grasp the reality of the Incarnation, believing that Christ comes only in some spiritualized, un-embodied way to be received by the hyper-sensitive and spiritual.

The nature of our human existence is that it is precisely when we are troubled, distracted and burdened by life that we are the least able to find Jesus, experience Jesus and be assured of Jesus' presence with us. A spiritualized Jesus is a "subjective" presence, subject to our ability to sense Him near, find Him when needed, trust that He is with us somehow, someday.

Instead, God has sent His Son to be an "objective" presence. That means His presence depends upon God and His Word and Spirit — not on us and our ability or inability to see Him with us. In the Small Catechism, Luther affirms that the only preparation or ability needed is to "believe these words: 'for you' and 'for the forgiveness of sins.'"

As Lutherans and biblical, sacramental Christians, we offer something different — an incarnational theology! As Lutherans and biblical, sacramental Christians, we celebrate Christ truly present in Word and Sacrament — for us and for the forgiveness of sins, life and salvation! May we keep that as the center of our lives and ministry — the miracle and mystery of Christmas, the miracle and mystery of the Incarnation — the Word made flesh to dwell among us!

YOUTH AND FAMILY MINISTRY

By Gary and Laurie Pecuch

This school year the faithwebbing.com monthly webinars are focusing on Gary and Laurie's "Trot through the Bible" course for youth. Join us on the second Tuesday of each month at 2 p.m. ET. There are plenty of good stories and activities you can use with your young people. Winter and spring topics include: Moses, Joshua-Judges, Gideon-Samson-Ruth and Samuel-Saul.

The remaining youth ministry online course schedule for this year is:

February – Models of Ministry

March – Developing Spiritual Disciplines

April – Basic Faith Skills Training



Contact us or visit the NALC Youth Workers page on Facebook to get links to webinars and online courses.

An all-NALC NEXUS Institute week is planned for July 7-12 at Grand View University in Des Moines, Iowa. NEXUS is designed to give deep-thinking high school youth a chance to learn about theology, service and ask questions of faith. It is a great experience and free from the time you arrive to the time you depart.

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

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NALC
North American Lutheran Church

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