



Lutheran Renewal and the Absolution

by *Rev. Dr. Steven K. Gjerde*, Vice President of Lutheran CORE

Whoever said it, said it well: without the absolution—"I forgive you all your sins for Jesus' sake"—Lutheranism has no particular reason to exist. Every issue of the Reformation, from preaching and the sacraments to papal authority, revolved around the bedrock confession that sinners receive mercy through Christ alone. Luther put it clearly in the Large Catechism:

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In this issue, Lutheran CORE's writers underline the need for absolution and reform. They discuss the projected decline of the ELCA and its ramifications. They find the ELCA lacking in the diversity of opinion arena and wont to condemn others and make them feel unwelcome. They suggest counters to revisionism to include training and sermons apologetic in tone.



Reflections on the Augsburg Confession

by *Pr. David Charlton*, Lutheran CORE Board Member

"The Model Constitution is how we have agreed to live together," she said. "No," I thought to myself, "the Augsburg Confession is how we have agreed to live together." The conversation arose because the synod office had asked me to update my congregation's constitution. I began-

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Not Here to Be Boiled

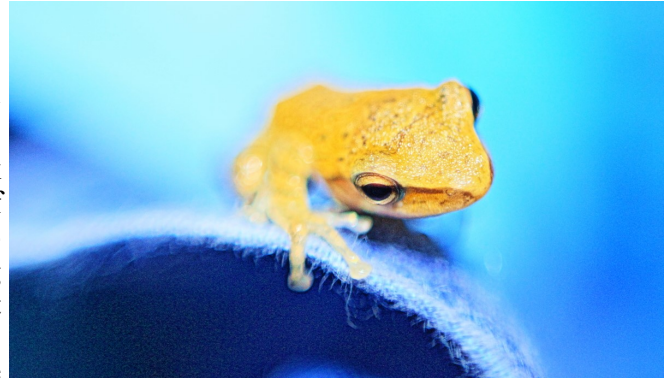
by Pr. [Brett Jenkins](#), Former Lutheran CORE Board Member

Brett Jenkins is an ardent defender of the historic, orthodox Christian faith. He is also an assistant dean in the North American Lutheran Church (NALC). We are very grateful that Brett continues to write for Lutheran CORE.

On August 25, 2010, at a meeting of Lutheran CORE that would at its close give birth to the separate organization of the North American Lutheran Church, I wrote this in my blog:

What the upcoming internet broadcasts and book are sure to fail to convey, however, is the sense of hopeful expectancy that characterizes these proceedings. The Spirit is definitely doing something amazing, as seemingly just the right people with just the precise expertise needed to tackle the issues before us as a church have been assembled from the disparate corners of North American Lutheranism. Not only has this been an immensely satisfying—though extremely challenging—couple of days intellectually, it has also been so emotionally and spiritually. ... Simply put, it is humbling to be here.

Because I had just taken a call at an ELCA church whose statement of faith aligned with that of Lutheran CORE but who needed to yet have the conversation about whether they could maintain that position within the ELCA, I would not join the ranks of the NALC for another 5 years. When I finally did become a pastor of



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Handing Over the Keys

by [Pr. Don Brandt](#), Director of the [Congregations in Transition \(CiT\)](#) Initiative

The word is definitely getting around. The ELCA's Office of Research and Evaluation, this last spring, released the results of their projection regarding anticipated ELCA decline over the next 31 years. The rather shocking projection is as follows, and is based on the starting point of membership and worship statistics as of the end of 2017.

Drastic Decline in Membership

So ELCA membership as of 2017 was 3.4 million. The projection for 2050 is that membership will be only 67,000! That's right, 67,000.

And weekly worship attendance? As of 2017 just under 900,000 people worshiped at ELCA congregations in a typical week. The projection, which in this case is for 2041, is that weekly worship attendance will be only 16,000. You read that correctly: 16,000.



Implications for the LCMC and NALC

So what, if any, are the conclusions and/or implications of these predictions when it comes to confessing Lutheran congregations in the LCMC and NALC? I can think of at least three.

1. These predictions regarding the rate of the ELCA's decline are probably based, to a degree, on the rate of decline between 2009 and 2012. That was the period when ELCA decline accelerated — dramatically — due to the policy changes in August of 2009. My point? The ELCA's rate of decline has not been as dramatic

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Obsessed with Diversity

by [Pr. Dennis D. Nelson](#), Executive Director of Lutheran CORE

There were several things in the October 10 News Story about the September 26-30 meeting of the ELCA's Conference of Bishops that I found to be most interesting, significant, and troubling. A link to that news release can be found [here](#).

First, I assume that the ELCA Conference of Bishops' highest value and greatest joy must be the dynamic that was highlighted in the title for the news story as well as what is emphasized in the second paragraph. The title is "ELCA Conference of Bishops welcomes greater diversity." The Rev. William O. Gafkjen, chairperson, described the conference as "more diverse in more ways than it has ever been." He also referred to the ELCA as "a church unaccustomed to such blessed diversity."

Evidently the ELCA Conference of Bishops' highest value and greatest joy is not the joy of heaven, which is described in Luke 15 as being like the rejoicing of a shepherd who finds the lost sheep, the woman who finds the lost coin, and the father whose son has returned home. Instead their highest value and greatest joy is diversity.

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ELCA: Answer the Question!

by [Pr. Dennis D. Nelson](#), Executive Director of Lutheran CORE

There is a question I have asked several times, but I have been unable to get an answer. The question is this –

How can the ELCA say that 2019 is the tenth anniversary of LGBTQIA+ persons being able to serve freely in the church when what was actually voted on and approved at the 2009 Churchwide Assembly was only the ordination of persons in publicly accountable, life-long, monogamous same gender relationships?

Recently I was sitting at a table during lunch with several pastors from the synod in which I have been rostered since retiring. When I realized that one of the persons at the table was a member of the synod council, I figured this was an opportunity to ask my question. So I did. His reply was, "I am new to the synod council." He then added, "That sounds like a question for the bishop." To which I responded, "I have asked the bishop, but I did not get an answer."

I then asked another person at the table, who told me, "I was hoping that you could answer that question."

I asked a third person. His immediate response was, "Cognitive dissonance!" I answered, "I do not see how this could be cognitive dissonance, and who are you saying is having cognitive dissonance? The ELCA in its making a claim about a tenth anniversary? L, G, B, T, Q, I, A, or plus persons, who are now able to



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ALPB Anniversary Medal Presented to Pope Francis

Pastor Terrence Weber, first non-Roman Catholic (RC) person to serve on a RC two member commission for the Canonization of a Saint, presented a medal to Pope Francis at the Vatican on November 5th. He said, "On behalf of 80 million Lutherans I present this medal to you commemorating your historic visit to Sweden for the Joint Commemoration of the 500th Anniversary of the Reformation and the 1999 Joint Declaration of the Doctrine of Justification."

In a phone conversation with the ALPB's Rev. Frederick Schumacher, Pr. Weber said that "the Pope examined both sides of the medal and while looking at the obverse where he appears next to Luther he smiled and pointed to his image and said, 'That's me and Luther!'"

Rev. Schumacher and family developed the concept for the medal. The photo was taken by a priest, a friend of Pr. Weber.

Click [here](#) to go to the ALPB's website.

Click [here](#) for details about the medal. Click [here](#) for Conflict to Communion.

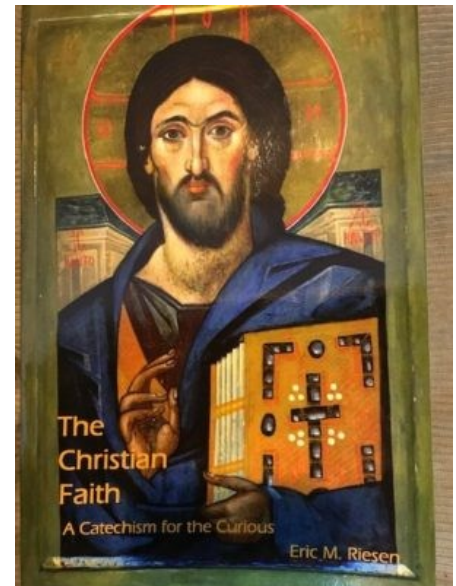


The Christian Faith: A Catechism for the Curious

Editor's note: I love this ALPB catechism, so I'm buying my teenager her own copy of it for Christmas. She can't have mine because it's too valuable to me. I read this book from cover-to-cover and it's exactly what she needs. Why? Because my daughter asks tough theological questions that I struggle to answer and Pr. Reisen answers just about all of them herein. It is called an adult catechism. As Pr. Jenkins noted in his article above, we need to "catechize a new generation of theologians from elementary school age on up in an intentionally countercultural way." This will help!

Dr. Robert Benne liked it too. He wrote, "It is a pleasure to write the preface for Pastor Reisen's new adult catechism. I not only read the manuscript in preparation for publication, I actually enjoyed it." Dr. Benne goes on to state that the book is winsomely written and that Pr. Reisen draws upon years of experience, is well-read, and offers "good orthodox Christian instruction of a Lutheran sort." He writes, "...he sees Lutheranism as a reform movement within Western Christianity."

Click [here](#) to buy the book.



March for Life and 2020 NALC Life Conference

Trinity Lutheran Church in Joppa, Maryland will host the 2020 NALC Life Conference on January 23, 2020—just one day before the 2020 March for Life in Washinton, DC. Joppa is about 60 miles from DC.

Click [here](#) for the full agenda for both events! Also, it is open to *all* Lutherans not just those of the NALC.



Photo Courtesy of Life Issues Institute

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“Everything, therefore, in the Christian Church is ordered to the end that we shall daily obtain there nothing but the forgiveness of sin” (Large Catechism, The Creed). Forgiveness is God’s mission, and there is no clearer statement of it than the absolution. If we want to talk renewal, both in the Church and in society, it must begin with that justifying word.

For Jesus’ Sake

I see a video of prisoners in Madagascar crowding around a Lutheran pastor for worship. What brings them? I imagine, perhaps wrongly, that they are like the incarcerated men and women to whom my congregation has ministered. Some of them come because they want a good word, while others are there to look good or because it’s a break from the cell. Despite such mixed motives, they also come knowing something basic about the faith: it’s supposed to be good for people with problems. It’s supposed to welcome people like them. Why do they think so? Where could such a rumor have started? “I forgive you all your sins for Jesus’ sake.” The Holy Spirit has fitted those words like a virus to the mixed up ideas and motives of men. It seeps through the cracks of all our walls as a day-long conference on dismantling patriarchy never could.

But now I come to a church near you, the one that promises to welcome everyone. I spend 65 minutes there trying to be invisible, as I’m on vacation and don’t feel social. Yet where I usually fail at being invisible, something else succeeds at doing so perfectly well: “I forgive you.” Where did it go? Is it still around here somewhere? Why, yes, it’s buried between two hard covers the color of a Thanksgiving relish, and it stayed there, too. There was a lot of splashing about at the font — it’s the “Thanksgiving for Baptism,” the bulletin says — but no one ever heard what it’s all about. Is renewal possible here?

The absolution is the renewal, for both church and society, for several reasons. First, it renews the church because it puts the church back where it belongs: in front of the empty tomb, facing the wide-open future that shines in the face of Christ. Like the empty tomb, forgiveness doesn’t erase the past. To the contrary, it carries the past forward—He’s still the man who died on the cross, wounds and all—but in such a way that *this* person with *such* a past may yet live, love, be worthy, and even rule. What excitement! What release!



Lost in Jesus

So if we want to renew the church’s mind on the matter of sexual ethics, for example, then we need to start talking forgiveness into that subject. That is, we must show more than how the New-Old Lies, with all their denial of family and creation, drift from the Biblical prescriptions. We must also carry those prescriptions to their end and show how the New-Old Lies corrupt the proclamation of forgiveness. Did Jesus die for this or that behavior? If so, then He died to forgive it, and we must contend for such — Christ’s honor demands it. “I cannot say it isn’t a sin, for then I would be stealing Christ’s glory from Him. He died to forgive it, you see. It’s in His hands, not yours or mine.” The sin must get lost in Jesus somewhere between Gabbatha and the grave, preached as sunken into His flesh and buried with Him, so that it’s no longer God’s to condemn nor ours to practice. It’s all on Jesus now — you can’t have it back!

That kind of absolution-thinking keeps opening a new future to the same old past. It disarms those who would make our debates a matter of old vs. new, letter vs. spirit, Pharisees vs. Jesus People (the binary couplings that even revisionists can’t kick, apparently), and turns our controverted subjects towards God’s mission, the speaking of the Gospel into every sin and circumstance. Most importantly, it passes on the rumor that first spread like fire among the apostles: God’s in love with you, and isn’t counting sins against you. This faith is good for us people with problems. It gives us a future with God and with each other and all of creation—“for wherever forgiveness is, there also are life and salvation” (Small Catechism, The Sacrament of the Altar).

**The sin must get lost
in Jesus ... It’s all on Je-
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Infectious Rumor of Mercy

Yet this absolution, coming from God, may renew things well beyond the church, because God's goodness always seems to spill over its borders. The absolution carries in itself more than a new future and a happy Lord. It carries also the stamp of that Lord's virtue and wholesome way. To trust forgiveness is to trust patience and compassion—who can forgive a sinner without taking the time to sympathize with him? And for Christians to trust and preach forgiveness is to trust and preach Christ crucified, the very picture of God “counting others better” than Himself (Philippians 2:3). When that image and rumor of mercy start permeating Christians, and Christians start seeping into society and infecting it, they take that virtue and ethic with them.

I read a poll recently that said most people think America stands on the brink of a civil war. The sexes, too, are increasingly estranged, as young people avoid dating either because they fear relationships or just getting arrested and sued. What we do as children becomes national news and a cause for mockery or hate. How can it be otherwise in a land that has mostly stopped hearing absolution? Roman Catholics find they can commune just as well without it, and Protestants are busy casting new visions for ministry or splashing at the font or running a stewardship drive. With the gradual disappearance of absolution and its attendant preaching, so also fades the best image we have of patience, compassion, humility, and the thirst for reconciliation—and if absolution fades, can Lutheranism shine?

Renewal in Absolution

I include this latter reflection about societal renewal because I know that cultural as well as churchly issues lie heavy on the hearts of Lutheran CORE folk. I commend to you the thought that both society and church will find their renewal in the absolution that we alone may speak: “I forgive you all your sins for Jesus' sake.” Lose that absolution, and you lose the point of being Lutheran. Lutheranism is simply being God's church, and God's church exists to preach and believe forgiveness. Speaking, preaching, and believing it, for sure, remain the priority. Consider also what the absolution teaches about God's will for His creation and who you are and what life really is, or how it delivers both righteousness and holiness of living. Any Christian or church could benefit from such reflection on God's most important word.

And a good place to start might be, you know, actually going to confession and hearing it.

Reflections on the Augsburg Confession

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work on it, but had a concern about a part of the Model Constitution that seemed to require me to violate the Augsburg Confession. When I shared concern with the synod office, that was the reply.

One of my greatest frustrations serving as a pastor in the ELCA is the feeling that the Augsburg Confession has been eclipsed as the standard for how we will live together. A perfect example of this is a [video greeting](#) given by Bishop Guy Erwin for the Southwest California Synod at the beginning of the 2019 Pride Month. He said, “Lutherans believe that God's love and mercy accepts us as we are, with no prior conditions, and then teaches us to love each other in return. This is what we call the Gospel.”

Now why get worked up about a message of acceptance to those who often feel unwelcome and condemned? It is not the idea of acceptance or the audience that causes me concern, but the message. I only mention Bishop Erwin's summary of the Gospel, because I have been hearing the same message for several years and in multiple contexts. I have heard it from bishops, teaching theologians, and churchwide staff. You might say that it has become the official definition of the Gospel in the ELCA.

Article IV Defines the Gospel

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Pr. David Charlton

Reflections on the Augsburg Confession

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What is the problem? There is no mention of sin and forgiveness. Article II of the Augsburg Confession defines our problem as sin. This sin separates us from God and one another and leads to eternal death. Article IV defines the Gospel as the message of forgiveness of sins for Jesus sake that is received by faith. Article III connects Articles II and IV by speaking of what God has done in Christ to reconcile us to himself and save us from our sins. A message of welcome and acceptance is surely appropriate, but it is not the Gospel. The Gospel is about redemption through Jesus Christ from sin, death and the devil.

I can remember a time in my life when I was acutely aware of my sinfulness. I would be horrified by the dishonesty, selfishness, self-righteousness and ill will of others, only to realize again and again that it was my own sin that I saw reflected in others. If you had told me at that time that God accepted me the way I was, it would have been of little comfort. I wanted forgiveness, reconciliation and a new beginning. That is what the Holy Spirit, working through the Gospel and the Sacraments gives.

Later on, in the same message, Bishop Erwin says, “We oppose all efforts to use our ancient scriptures to condemn others or separate them from us.” I certainly have no desire to use the Scriptures to condemn others or separate them from us. There is only one qualification for those who would seek God. That is to be a sinner in need of forgiveness. If the Church took a page from Alcoholics Anonymous, it might look something like this: “Hi, my name is David. I’m a sinner.” “Welcome, David.”

However, the statement that we do not use the Law to condemn others sounds strange coming from a leader of the ELCA. First of all, while we do not use Scripture to condemn others, we are to use the Scriptures to proclaim the Law. This Law reveals our sin and makes us aware of our need for Christ. It is the business of the Church to proclaim the Law and the Gospel.

Condemned by the ELCA

What makes that statement stranger still is that the ELCA has become quite good at condemning others and making people feel unwelcome. If you happen to be a person who isn’t convinced about Global Warming, doesn’t believe Scripture sanctions same sex marriage, is a police officer, a member of the armed forces, is a supporter of Israel, supports enforcement of immigration laws, or who opposes abortion, you are quite likely to feel condemned by the ELCA. Although I myself am more of a political moderate than a conservative, I am quite aware of how it must feel for a conservative member of my congregation to listen to what is said at synod assemblies, in print and in various messages from this church. When I raise these concerns, I do not always get a sympathetic ear.

What is most disappointing about all of this, is that in all the condemnation of those with wrong political and theological views forgiveness is seldom offered. The strange, and I assume unintended result, is the loss of the central mission of the Church. In the midst of talk about acceptance, we are a church that is quite good at condemnation. What we fail to offer to either those we accept or those we condemn is the forgiveness and new life that come through Jesus Christ. The Augsburg Confession, which for Lutherans is “how we have agreed to live together,” points us to a better way.

Note from CORE Executive Director, Dennis D. Nelson: We warmly welcome Pastor David Charlton to the board of Lutheran CORE. David is pastor of St. Paul's Lutheran Church (ELCA) in Niceville, Florida. He is deeply committed to the proclamation and preservation of the historic, orthodox Christian faith, which is based upon the Bible and is expressed in the Lutheran Confessions. We look forward to all of the articles that he will be writing for our newsletter, CORE Voice.



The ELCA has become quite good at condemning others and making people feel unwelcome instead of offering forgiveness of sins and new life through Jesus Christ.

Article II defines our problem as sin. Article III speaks of what God has done in Christ to save us from our sins.

Not Here to Be Boiled

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the NALC, it felt nice to simply breathe easily for a while; to not feel like I was fighting every aspect of the institution that was supposed to *help* me proclaim the gospel just for the opportunity to do so.

No More Easy Breathing

Nine years into the NALC's life, the time for breathing easy is over.

Oh, we seem to be handling our inevitable disagreements healthfully, without a trace of the Politburo-style ecclesiastical maneuvering we all experienced within the ELCA, where, to paraphrase Orwell, it was clear that "some Christians are more equal than others." There is also no hint of doctrinal departure from Great Tradition Christianity or the revisionist hermeneutics that breed the same—yet.

I add the "yet" in that last sentence not because I see it happening now but can foresee it happening before my funeral liturgy. I foresee this as I teach my confirmation class full of 7th and 8th graders and my Tuesday morning Bible study full of 70 and 80 year olds, because I see the vast distance between the experiential, intellectual, and imaginative worlds they inhabit. The older group are largely unaware of how different the world the young live in is from the one they grew up in and they are shocked when I acquaint them with some of its contours. The young are being trained by their schools, entertainment, and constant diet of technology to view the older as at best hopelessly out of touch with the self-evidently true and even scientifically "proven" categories of the new (liberal) orthodoxy. *At worst, they are being trained to view them as oppressors to be forcefully sidelined, re-educated—and if necessary, silenced.*

Oh, the latter, rage-filled part of that progression will largely not come until their thorough catechesis into the new civic religion at the collegiate level, but the foundations are being laid far earlier. Six years ago, I had a youth group member inform me that she was an "LGBT ally," and many more former youth group members have done the same. Some of these had attended the local evangelical Christian high school. Others were attending an evangelical fellowship in college and were even engaged in active Christian outreach on campus.

Could I have imagined such a reality, coming of age in the 1980's? Could my Bible study participants, doing the same in Eisenhower's America, imagined it? Could the founders of the NALC imagine, less than a decade ago, that a local fire company would raise money by offering as bingo prizes not homemade jams and pies but sex toys or the billboard pictured with this article, planted in the heart of historically Pennsylvania Dutch country? Could they imagine that people could be publicly shamed and careers summarily ended for even *questioning* whether a person's experience of being in the wrong body could be anything other than an absolute and legitimate expression of identity?

It is a brave new world.

The Authority of Holy Scripture

I focus on the sexuality issues not because of any inherent interest in them, but because as Dr. Robert Gagnon noted so many years ago, you cannot espouse the new, affirming positions on these issues without evacuating the Bible of its *authority* as Holy Scripture and the Word of God. You cannot affirm the authority of Genesis while espousing a "non-binary" (Trans) view of human sexuality. As the ELCA has recently confirmed, without a high view of Biblical authority, you cannot assert the uniqueness and necessity of Jesus Christ for human salvation. It was by reflection upon the books that we know as the canonical New Testament that the Council of Nicaea shifted from being predominantly [Arian](#) in its view of Christ to articulating the doctrine we know as the [Hypostatic Union](#) with near uniformity. (Not surprisingly, Arius and a close personal friend held out for their own view against the assembly.) It was fifteen years ago that an ELCA pastor brazenly asserted to me as a seminarian at a regional youth gathering that, "we only know about the Trinity from the

The young are being trained to view the older as out of touch with "proven" categories of the new (liberal) orthodoxy.



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Bible; God could easily be more like the Hindu idea of Brahmin, having countless avatar pseudopods to minister to the ‘endlessly diverse people’ s/he has created.”

Without a high view of Biblical authority, we can glean from its pages the sorts of vaguely inspiring ideas about God that are largely our projections in the first place, but we cannot receive revelations about God—or about God’s will for us, His creatures.

Danger of Theological Revisionism

And that is exactly what theological revisionism is all about; it is about recasting God’s revelations as human conceptions, and once everything is a human conception, all is mere politics, the rules of which we know well from Plato, Hobbes, Machiavelli, Nietzsche, and Foucault... not to mention Marx, Lenin, Mao, and Alinsky. In such a world, it is perfectly legitimate for the philosopher-kings-and-queens to determine which views are “more equal than others” and to eliminate cross-examination in the interest of “justice.”

Per Stalin, “We don't let our people have guns. Why should we let them have ideas?”

And this is exactly what is happening. Consider this letter sent by ‘We, few of the Black students here at Pomona College and the Claremont Colleges’ to the administration of Claremont McKenna College, who had dared to permit conservative scholar Heather Mac Donald to speak on campus:

Historically, white supremacy has venerated the idea of objectivity, and wielded a dichotomy of ‘subjectivity vs. objectivity’ as a means of silencing oppressed peoples. The idea that there is a single truth – ‘the Truth’ – is a construct of the Euro-West that is deeply rooted in the Enlightenment, which was a movement that also described Black and Brown people as both subhuman and impervious to pain. This construction is a myth and white supremacy, imperialism, colonization, capitalism, and the United States of America are all of its progeny. The idea that the truth is an entity for which we must search, in matters that endanger our abilities to exist in open spaces, is an attempt to silence oppressed peoples.^[1]

Unlikely Ally

Douglas Murray recounts the incident in his recent book *The Madness of Crowds*. If a gay intellectual from Great Britain seems an unlikely ally of a Christianity that is both evangelical and catholic, read the way he goes on to analyze this letter:

“‘The Truth’ is a construct of the Euro-West. It is hard to think of a phrase which can at one and the same time be so wildly misguided and so dangerous in its implications. If ‘the Truth’ (in scare quotes) is a white thing, then what is everyone else meant to live in and strive towards?”

Stalin pithily noted, “Ideas are far more powerful than guns. We don't let our people have guns. Why should we let them have ideas?” Our young people are being deprived of the most important idea ever, an idea that is not white or black, gay or straight, Christian or otherwise; they are being systematically deprived of the idea of *truth*. Furthermore, they are being taught that the pursuit of it is disloyal, bigoted, and dangerous.

Theological revisionism recasts God’s revelations as human conceptions; after that all is mere politics, the rules of which we know well from Plato, Hobbes, Machiavelli, Nietzsche, and Foucault... not to mention Marx, Lenin, Mao, and Alinsky.

Future Outlook of the NALC

As a fellow NALC clergyman noted to me recently, “The NALC was formed at the last possible moment it could have been, historically-speaking.” This undoubtedly displays an admirable ecclesiological instinct, for it is indeed part of Great Tradition Christianity that the Church of Jesus Christ is “one, holy, catholic, and apostolic.” It also sets forth the challenge clearly before us, as it was founded by people I would categorize as the last well-catechized generations. Here I refer to their catechesis not only with the Church, but their cultural catechesis as well. Most of us on the clergy roster of the NALC are still here because we underwent a migration made necessary by counter-cultural convictions. What will become of the NALC as its first native-born

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daughters and sons rise to offices of prominence within the church? Philosophy was once described as the handmaiden to theology because it provided categories of meaning that helped people do the very difficult work of theology. What will happen to the church's proclamation when its young pastors have not been formed in the fundamental categories of meaning that make clear thinking about the Bible possible? What will happen to it if they are convinced by their primer school training that to even *consider* certain ideas makes them the moral equivalent of a Nazi?

What will become of the NALC as its first native-born daughters and sons rise to offices of prominence within the church?

Students of Christian history can broadly trace the theological revisionism of our day back through the social gospel movement of the early 20th century to the “higher critics” of the Enlightenment. It is a history of more than ideas; it is a history of people, of champions of ideas who viewed themselves as the saviors of a movement with some social utility (Christianity) whose convictions were hopelessly backwards and out of touch with the “obvious truths” of the modern world. For all orthodox Lutherans, the NALC included, the challenge is to catechize a new generation of theologians from elementary school age on up in an intentionally *countercultural* way. We will need to be aware of the prevailing ideas and neologisms that are being introduced in a deliberate ploy to undermine a worldview congruent with that of orthodox Biblical Christianity. As Christians, we have no stake in Western culture *qua* Western culture, but to the degree that what we know as Western culture is the product of Christian theology, including its emphasis on truth as a fundamental category of meaning, we need to advocate for what is in imminent danger of being lost.

Written nearly thirty years ago, in his classic book *The Once and Future Church*, Loren Mead noted that the West was becoming the Church's new mission field and that state church traditions like Lutheranism, used as they were to cultural underwriting of their religious project, were likely to have the most difficulty adapting to this new reality. It remains for us to determine whether his words were merely cautionary... or prophetic.

We Must Teach All Our People

Most importantly of all, we need to communicate to our people from the oldest to the youngest how the orthodox Biblical teachings on creation and fall, judgment and grace, repentance and forgiveness, faith and obedience, spiritual bondage and true freedom are more compelling and truly loving than the secular narratives with which they are being daily indoctrinated. We must teach them who God is and who we are *meant* to be as creatures made in His image but defaced by sin almost to the point of unrecognizability. We must teach them that because of that reality, no matter the strength of our emotions, our own narratives about our inner lives are not the most reliable story about ourselves, but rather God's story about us, recounted in the Bible, holds primacy of place.

We must do this *knowing* that our work is being undermined both by determined ideologues and well-meaning people engaged in herd behavior, what Murray accurately deems “the madness of crowds.” We must be clear with them that this dynamic is going to be part of their experience as Christians in this culture without becoming reactionary or uncharitable toward those who hate us.

In one of the responses to my [Postmodernism articles](#), I was accused of being a “reactionary theologian.” I confess that I have never heard the term before, but it sounds like the sort of jingoistic turn of phrase intended to make the hard work of thinking through complex issues unnecessary—a word like “anti-revolutionary.” On the August day in 2010 recounted earlier, Dr. Steven D. Paulson reminded the gathered assembly that Martin Luther had noted that “it is a characteristic of love to be easily deceived.” We must highlight this reality and remind them that their love—especially their love of friends and the consequent alliances they make with them—like the rest of themselves, is fallen, disordered, and so, unreliable until it is conformed to the revealed Word of God.

Our young people are being deprived of the idea of *truth* and that the pursuit of it is disloyal, bigoted, and dangerous.

The Frog

We all know the old saw. How do you boil a frog? If you put him in hot water he will jump out before he

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Not Here to Be Boiled

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gets too injured, but if you put him in cold water and turn up the heat slowly, he will be boiled before he knows what happened to him.

Most reading this article have spent our lives watching the Lutheran frog being boiled. Some of us felt the need to “go out and be separate.” If we hope to not see our frogs boiled in the way other communions have unfortunately experienced, we will need to be intentionally countercultural. Our catechesis and our sermons will need to be apologetic in tone, whether we are apologists by vocation or not. We will need to listen carefully to a world that hates us so we may build bridges to their linguistic worlds of meaning and so that we can dismantle Trojan Horses meant to destroy Christianity and its necessarily attendant, coherent worldview from within.

In 1809, biographer Thomas Charlton popularized the phrase, “the price of liberty is eternal vigilance” in our newly-birthing republic. The bloody reign of terror had just recently ended in France, a cautionary tale for those who might have complacently believed that the new order was enough to insure against future tyranny.

We ought to take a lesson from this page of history. The price of the liberty that the *true* gospel of Jesus Christ alone can bring is free, but the price of preaching that gospel fully and faithfully is eternal vigilance.

Vigilance Required

On August 26, 2010, as the theological conference transitioned to the constituting convocation of a re-visioned Lutheran CORE, I reflected in my blog that “it was time to see if this dog would hunt.” Could the ideas we had bandied about for two days now become incarnate, take on flesh in a living institution that actually facilitated the living proclamation of “the eternal gospel” in the ways God has ordained that it should?

As I reflect on the state of the Church and the nature of its current mission in the wake of Reformation Sunday, I give thanks that it could happen, but I note that we are sitting in water that seems to be already getting warm. Vigilance is required.

All orthodox Lutherans, the NALC included, need to catechize a new generation of theologians from elementary school age on up in an intentionally countercultural way.



[1] Murray, Douglas. *The Madness of Crowds*. Bloomsbury Publishing. Kindle Edition.

Handing Over the Keys

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in the last seven years. Granted, the ELCA continues to lose tens of thousands of members each year. And granted, the exodus of most of the ELCA’s more evangelistic churches has had a lasting and permanent effect on its statistical “bottom line.” However, my guess is that the projections for 2041 and 2050 will not be quite as bleak as predicted. They will still be dramatic, though. After all, when the ELCA National Assembly passes an amendment questioning whether Lutherans can ethically witness to people of other faiths, we can’t expect their members and congregations to be engaged in evangelistic outreach.

2. We need to acknowledge that these dire projections are emblematic of demographic trends that, to some degree, are impacting all mainline Protestant bodies. So while I suspect NALC and LCMC congregations will fare better than the ELCA between now and 2050, here is the painful truth: We too are rapidly aging faith communities. And we, like the ELCA, have a membership that is considera-

The ELCA, the NALC and the LCMC are all rapidly aging faith communities.

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Handing Over the Keys

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bly older than both the general U.S. population and, I might add, older than most evangelical/non-denominational churches. So we best not smirk or gloat at these projections from the Office of Research and Evaluation.

3. Third, these ELCA projections should serve as a wake-up call when it comes to our generational challenges in the NALC and LCMC.

Keychain Leadership

One of the congregations that is using the [Congregations in Transition](#) process recently signed up for the Fuller Seminary Youth Institute “Growing Young Assessment.” This assessment is based on the Institute’s book entitled *Growing Young*. After completing the assessment the Institute suggested this congregation focus on “Keychain Leadership.” “Keychain Leadership” is about focusing on opportunities to “hand over the keys” of leadership to young adults, teens, and parents with young children. The Fuller Youth Institute also suggested this church “prioritize” young people in the life of the congregation, and encourage older members to “dive deeper” into relationships with younger members. One specific example mentioned in the assessment was to have older members enter into “coaching” relationships with teens and younger adults.

I suspect these suggestions might be appropriate for a great many of our congregations.

It Might Be Time

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, by 2034 the U.S. population 65 and older will exceed the population under 18. One American journalist calls this the “coming gerontocracy.” Many of our LCMC and NALC congregations are already there. It might be time to start “handing over the keys.”

When the ELCA National Assembly passes an amendment questioning whether Lutherans can ethically witness to people of other faiths, we can’t expect them to be engaged in evangelistic outreach.

Obsessed with Diversity

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ELCA and the Diversity of Opinion

Second, considering the recent ELCA Churchwide Assembly, I wonder how much diversity actually exists in the ELCA. Sure, the Conference of Bishops might now have more racial and ethnic diversity in their membership than ever before, but is there also a diversity of opinion? Is a diversity of opinion even welcome in the ELCA? Because orthodox students at ELCA seminaries tell me about being bullied and even silenced, I would say, “No.” Two resolutions that were voted on at the Churchwide Assembly – to approve the social statement on “Faith, Sexism, and Justice” and the “Declaration of Inter-Religious Commitment” – received a resounding “Yes” from at least 97% of the voting members. Reading that, I wonder, is there really any diversity of opinion in the ELCA? Would a diversity of opinion be welcome? Would it be tolerated? I would say, “No.” An amendment was proposed to the “Declaration of Inter-Religious Commitment,” which would have removed the statement, “We must be careful about claiming to know God’s judgments regarding another religion.” That proposed amendment was based upon the clear words of Jesus in John 14: 6 – “I am the way, the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father except through me.” When I read about how discussion of that amendment was almost immediately cut off and the amendment was soundly defeated, I say, “A diversity of opinion is not welcome in the ELCA.”

Is diversity of opinion welcome in an ELCA where orthodox students are silenced & bullied in the ELCA’s own seminaries?

Diversity Among ELCA Bishops

The 2009 social statement, “Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust,” described four different views on same sex relationships and stated that all four views would be honored and treated with respect within “this church.”

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Obsessed with Diversity

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We now have a bishop – Bishop Leila Ortiz of the Metro Washington D. C. Synod – who accepts polyamory (three or more partners). A link to a video where she speaks in an accepting way about that kind of a relationship can be found [here](#). That certainly is a kind of diversity. But is there also a diversity among the Conference of Bishops so that at least one bishop holds to and advocates for traditional views? If there is, why do we never hear from that bishop? Is that kind of diversity either not present, not allowed, or not allowed to be expressed?

Not Equal

Third, Bishop Gafkjen describes the results of this “blessed diversity” in this way. “It uncovers assumptions, challenges disparities and inequities, and calls for repentance and transformation” in the church. What in the world does that mean? Whatever it means, I am certain it does not refer to the “disparities and inequities” of the way in which the last ten years the ELCA has only supported and promoted the most revisionist views of human sexuality. It has not shown equal “profound respect for the conscience-bound belief” (“Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust,” page 21) of those who hold to traditional views, even though those who hold to traditional views were led to expect such “profound respect,” based upon the language of the 2009 social statement.

If the ELCA basically ceases to exist within one generation, why wasn't Dr. Zscheile's article discussed at the 2019 CWA?

No Mention of Report

Fourth, I find it absolutely astounding that there is no mention at all that the Conference of Bishops discussed at all the recent report from the ELCA's Office of Research and Evaluation, and the article by Dr. Dwight Zscheile of Luther Seminary, that was based upon that report. Dr. Zscheile's article is entitled “[Will the ELCA Be Gone in 30 Years?](#)” Those documents reveal some rather shocking numbers based upon current trends in the ELCA. A link to Dr. Zscheile's article can be found [here](#). Is it really possible that membership in the ELCA could drop from just under 3.5 million in 2017 to just over 66,500 in the year 2050? Is it really possible that average Sunday morning attendance across the entirety of the ELCA could actually drop from 899,000 in 2017 to less than 16,000 in 2041? Could the ELCA basically cease to exist within one generation? Dr. Zscheile writes, “For all the energy spent on trying to turn things around over the past 40 years, there is little to show.”

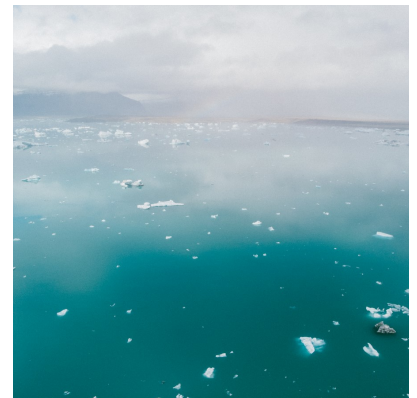
I understand that this study came out last spring, so I find it absolutely astounding that there is no mention that either the Churchwide Assembly or the Conference of Bishops even brought up the report. Rather what are they doing? Celebrating their “blessed diversity.” Reminds me of the definition of insanity – thinking that you can get different and/or better results just continuing to do the same thing. It would be like if the crew of the Titanic were to celebrate their “blessed diversity” even after the ship ran into an iceberg.

Fifth, I find the comment from Presiding Bishop Elizabeth Eaton in the third paragraph to be very revealing. She said, “I am convinced that the decisions we took were . . . not a flash-in-the-pan, reflexive attempt to seem ‘relevant.’” Why would she make a statement like that unless she was concerned that that is exactly what the decisions were or that is an accusation that she heard?

Sixth, I find it astounding what she says next. She quotes from Acts 15: 28, which is part of the letter from the Conference in Jerusalem to the “believers of Gentile origin.” “It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us.” How in the world could she make a claim like that – that the Holy Spirit agrees with the ELCA?

Go and Make Disciples

Compare the book of Acts and the letters of Paul, which are full of references to Jesus and to God, with the summary of actions from the ELCA Churchwide Assembly, where there is no mention of Jesus and only one



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Obsessed with Diversity

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mention of God. A link to that summary can be found [here](#). Compare the clear message of the Bible that it does matter whether people know, love, believe in, and put their trust in Jesus with the words of the “Declaration of Inter-Religious Commitment.” That document says, “We must be careful about claiming to know God’s judgments regarding another religion.” The final words of Jesus to his followers were, “Go and make disciples of all nations.” According to the “Declaration of Inter-Religious Commitment,” our main role is not to do that, but only to love and serve our neighbor.

ELCA’s Zscheile Article lists root cause of decline: “We aren’t clear about what’s distinctive about being Christian.”

Cause of the Decline

How can someone say that the Holy Spirit agrees with the ELCA when the ELCA is saying that the Christian faith has nothing unique that is important and essential to offer to the world? Again I would like to quote from Dr. Zscheile’s article mentioned above. Dwight Zscheile and his colleague, Michael Binder, give as one of the ways of naming the root cause of the ELCA’s precipitous decline, “We aren’t clear about what’s distinctive about being Christian.” If the ELCA believes that it has nothing unique that is important and essential to offer to the world and if the ELCA is not clear about what is distinctive about being Christian, then how could the ELCA hope to experience the power of God and how could the ELCA say that the Holy Spirit agrees?

No Presentations on Traditional Views

Finally, the news story mentions that the Conference of Bishops received a training session by the executive director of Reconciling Works, that focused on sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression. Just as there was no representation of traditional views at the [2018 ELCA Youth Gathering](#), where a transgender advocate and two members of the “Naked and Unashamed” movement were among the keynote speakers and one of the most prominent voices in the ELCA led 30,000 young people in a chant rejecting traditional views as a lie, so the Conference of Bishops once again receives no presentation from those who hold to traditional views. If they were to do so, would that be just too much “blessed diversity”?

How could the ELCA say that the Holy Spirit agrees?

ELCA: Answer the Question!

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serve freely? Or people like me who are asking the question?”

He never replied. Instead he said, “The world has changed since 2009.” I said that I agreed that the world has changed since 2009, but that does not change what was voted on and approved in 2009. He then argued, “Same sex marriage has become legal across the country since 2009.” Again, I said that I agreed that that has happened, but, again, I made the point that that did not change what was actually voted on and approved in 2009.

There are many who believe they were deceived.

He then said, “LGBTQIA+ persons’ being able to serve freely is the logical next step to what was approved in 2009.” To which I replied, “There were many back in 2009 who were concerned – and who were belittled for being concerned - that if the ordination of people in publicly accountable, lifelong, monogamous same gender relationships was approved, then that would lead to the approval of the ordination of other persons who were not eligible for ordination prior to 2009.” I then added, “There are many who believe that they were deceived. The vote was purposefully defined as being only about persons in publicly accountable, monogamous, same gender relationships in order to get enough votes to get the resolution approved. And then once the resolution was approved, then the description of who would now be eligible for ordination would be expanded.” He replied, “That would be an example of the hermeneutics of suspicion.” To which I agreed that,

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ELCA: Answer the Question!

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yes, many people were suspicious about what was being said back in 2009 versus what was intended for the future.

I then asked him, "If the ELCA is now allowing LGBTQIA+ persons to serve freely in the church, what is the standard by which the ELCA will decide what new sexual identities, expressions, and behaviors – now identified by the "+" part of LGBTQIA+ - would be approved and what would not be approved for ordination?" He did not have an answer, nor did he even seem to feel that there was a reason to be concerned about and ask such a question. Rather what he said next was, "Where are you from?" I was perceptive enough to realize that the conversation was over.

Recap of Encuentro 2019

by [Keith L. Forni](#), Member of Lutheran CORE

"...Build yourselves up in your most holy faith..." Jude 20

"...Mantenganse en el amor de Dios, edificandose sobre la base de su santisima fe..." Judas 20

On Holy Cross Day, Saturday September 14th over seventy lay leaders, pastors and neighbors gathered at St. Timothy Lutheran Church in Chicago's Hermosa neighborhood for the inter-Lutheran "*Encuentro*" for Hispanic Latino Ministries, sponsored annually by Lutheran CORE.

Encuentro -- "encounter" -- is an apt name for this event. In coming together, participants convene in the name of the Triune God -- Father, Son and Holy Spirit -- and encounter one another through a full day of fellowship, prayer, learning, reflection and conversation. Some who attend have little or no experience in Spanish language or bilingual Parish Ministry but they come to encounter... to listen to and dialogue with those who have served in such contexts. All who participate meet one another in a hospitable atmosphere which provides for joyful exchange of culturally contextual, Christ-centered ministries and resources. Consider for example the spirited celebration of the Misa Panamericana, led by Mariachi Tamazula Juvenil, in a sanctuary built by Lutherans of Norwegian heritage.

Lutherans of various denominational bodies ELCA, LCMS, NALC and LCMC have taken part in the *Encuentro* over the years, defying a prevailing pattern of denominational separation. Lutheran cousins come together around the power of Christ's Great Commission (Matthew 28). In Chicago, this pattern of inter-relational ministry in Hispanic Latino neighborhoods actually reflects the tone of cooperation shown by earlier Lutheran generations in the 1960s and 70s when the first Lutheran Latino Ministries were being planted in the city.

Dr. Maxwell Johnson, an ELCA pastor and professor at the University of Notre Dame, presented "Baptism: Walking Wet in the Via Crucis." That topic coupled wonderfully with the rededication of a long out-of-use baptismal font, now placed in St Timothy's sanctuary for sacramental use.



Pr Dennis Nelson, Pr Myrta Robles, behind Pr Robles is Professor Klaus Peter Adam, Bishop Yehiel Curry, Pr Eardly Mendis, Pr Keith Forni & First Lutheran parishioners, Jerry Wraas and Bob Wraas, after rededication of St. Timothy's baptismal font.

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Recap of *Encuentro* 2019

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Participating in that rededication was the Rev. Yehiel Curry, Bishop of the Metropolitan Chicago Synod ELCA, who expressed delight at being able to attend a portion of the gathering --even if it was at the end of a very busy day. "I represent the entire Synod," he noted, adding that congregations should anticipate visitation by him and his staff on the Lord's Day. "I will tell my staff that Sunday is a work day for us."

"The Virgin of Guadalupe: Not Just for Roman Catholics Anymore" was Dr. Johnson's afternoon address. At the heart of this Mexican apparition's legacy is the story of "the God who cares for the lowly." The Biblical touchstone for this tradition is the Magnificat: Mary's song which exalts the Lord God and highlights His "casting down the mighty from their thrones and raising up those of low degree."

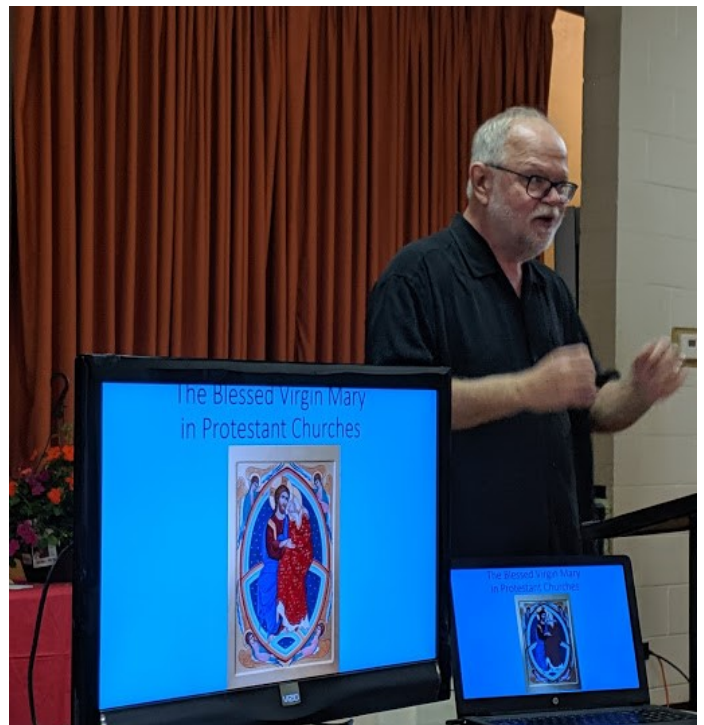
This *Encuentro*, hosted by an ELCA / Lutheran CORE member parish in a neighborhood called "beautiful" ("*Hermosa*") welcomes Lutheran believers by the power of the Holy Spirit to envision and experience church with an expanded embrace of racial diversity. This is a humbling privilege for those who are involved as it plays out against the trend of mainline churches like the ELCA which has shifted in membership from 92% white to 94% white in just three years from 2015 to 2018 according to the Rev. Chris Boerger, outgoing ELCA Secretary (see [his 2019 Churchwide Assembly Report reference in "Living Lutheran," September / October '19](#)).

Encuentros.... meetings... in culturally diverse neighborhood parishes can fortify the Church's passion for her Lord's Great Commission. Secretary Boerger has noted: "If there is to be a future for this denomination, we must pay attention to who is living in our neighborhood and our community."

Just so, when *encuentros* with neighbors multiply and relationships within and beyond church walls grow, breakthrough moments can occur.

At the conclusion of Dr. Johnson's presentation, one such neighbor, Genoveva, stood up and, in her native Spanish and surrounded by her family, invited all at the *Encuentro* to come to her home (just around the corner from St. Timothy) on December 11th for Advent songs, prayers, traditional tamales and *champurado* (a hot beverage) on the eve of the commemoration day for the Virgin of Guadalupe.

That's an *encuentro* that is eagerly anticipated!



Dr. Maxwell Johnson

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We Would Love to Help You Get the Word Out

If you are planning an event that you believe Lutheran CORE members would want to know about and that is consistent with the [Common Confession](#), please let us know. **Brief articles and pictures are always welcome.** We also can share them via our website, Facebook and Twitter feeds. Contact CORE's editor, Kim Smith, at kss01ohio@gmail.com.

Coming Events

2019 Lutherans for Life Regional Conferences	San Francisco, CA.	Final conference is Nov. 16th	"Did God Really Say ...?"	Click here
2020 NALC Life Conference	Trinity Lutheran Church, Joppa, MD	Jan.23, 2020		Click here
March for Life 2020	Washington, D.C.	Jan.24, 2020	Silent No More	Click here
Disciplelife 2020	Sheraton Orlando North Hotel, Maitland, FL	Feb.13, 2020 @ 1 pm —Feb.15	A Vision for Forming Disciples Through Word and Sacrament	Click here
Pro Ecclesia Conference 2020	Loyola University, Baltimore, MD	Jun. 8-10, 2020	The Sermon on the Mount Save the date!	Click here

Website Features

- * Want to find specific newsletter articles or Letters from the Director? Check out our **new** topical index for our Communications page. See [Topical Index](#).
- * CORE's [Transitions \(CiT\) page](#) is for congregations in transition. Learn how a trained coach can be assigned to help your congregation!
- * CORE connects confessing congregations and pastors on its [Clergy Connect](#) page. We have again created two new posts for churches seeking pastors since the last newsletter was published.
- * Check out our [Worship](#) page to see all the worship resources Pastor Cathy Ammlung has posted including [Prayers of the Church](#).
- * CORE posts a [daily devotion](#).
- * CORE posts a short list of blog friends under [Friends of Lutheran CORE](#).



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