

Once You Know the Makeup, You Know the Outcome

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



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If there ever will be a time when that old adage will be proven true, it will be with the ELCA's thirty-five-member Commission for a Renewed Lutheran Church.

This commission was formed in response to action taken by the ELCA's 2022 Churchwide Assembly. The assembly directed the Church Council "to establish a Commission for a Renewed Lutheran Church" which would be "particularly attentive to our shared commitment to dismantle racism" and would "present its findings and recommendations to the 2025 Churchwide Assembly in preparation for a possible reconstituting convention."

Later communication from the ELCA Church Council stated that the commission should be made up of at least 25% people of color or whose primary language was other than English and 20% youth and young adults. Keeping in mind that the membership of the typical ELCA congregation is older and white, this means that the commission will not represent the ELCA as it is but the ELCA as those who are leading and driving the process want the ELCA to be.

The thirty-five members of the commission have been chosen and have met once (in mid-July). Their biographical paragraphs can be found on the ELCA website under www.elca.org/future.

As I read the bios there is no doubt in my mind that the commission is made up of people of great experience and expertise. I have no question about their ability. My concern is with their passions and priorities. Reading their bios and remembering that these are the people who have been chosen to reshape the ELCA, one realizes that in a very short

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On Christian Nationalism

by [Pr. Kevin Haug](#), ELCA Pastor in Texas



Santino Burrola recorded a video and posted it to TikTok. He was fired from his job at a grocery store for the offense. What did he do wrong? Inappropriately filming someone in the restroom? Dancing in the aisles while on the clock? No. He recorded thieves stealing from the store. He peeled aluminum foil off the license plate of the get-away vehicle so that it would become visible. Hoping that the culprits would be caught, he posted the video, and at least one of the thieves was caught. For his actions in trying to stop people from stealing, he was fired.

The store cited its policy that employees should not interfere with people shoplifting to “minimize the risk to our associates.”ⁱ

If you read the title to this piece, you may be wondering how this story relates to Christian Nationalism. It doesn’t seem to tie in at all. Please bear with me, and I will try to show you how. There is a Christian Nationalism which should be rejected and condemned vociferously, but there are also some thoughts and ideas which are labeled “Christian Nationalism” in an attempt to smear those who offer them as well as to dismiss those ideas without having to engage them and understand why they are held; and those thoughts and ideas directly relate to the Santio Burrola situation.

First, we must define Christian Nationalism. There is no firm definition, at least that I have found. In our postmodern society, this is par for the course. The muddier we can make definitions, the more we can apply or deny them to a given situation, group, or movement.

But I don’t play those games. Muddying the waters only sows confusion and chaos. Therefore, you do not need to guess my operating definition of Christian Nationalism. It is this: *The belief that God*

has given the U.S. a special blessing and destiny, and that to be American means to be explicitly Christian. Therefore the United States should impose the Christian faith upon its population in public life including in its understanding and application of the law. Many would call my definition too limited, and they would like to add several caveats to it including the following:

- The U.S. was established to be an explicitly Christian nation.ⁱⁱ
- That Christianity should have a privileged position in society.ⁱⁱⁱ
- That it provides cover for white supremacy and racial subjugation.^{iv v}

I reject these caveats and additions, and I explain why below. However, I also believe it is important for Christians to unequivocally reject and condemn the definition which I have set forth. Why?

For two substantial reasons: First, Christianity is invitational, not impositional. Plain and simple. Nowhere does Jesus ever suggest that anyone be forced to become a Christian or follow Him. In fact, when people reject Jesus, He lets them go. He doesn’t zap them. He doesn’t punish them. He allows them to walk away to follow their own whims. He focuses His attention on those who do accept the invitation to follow Him.

Faith in Christ does not come by forcing people to follow Jesus. Faith comes by hearing the Word of God and having one’s heart transformed by the power of the Good News of Jesus Christ. This is our only and sole weapon of transformation and bringing of the Kingdom of God to earth. Imposing the Christian faith by fiat does not change a heart, and the times when it has been tried have led to disaster.

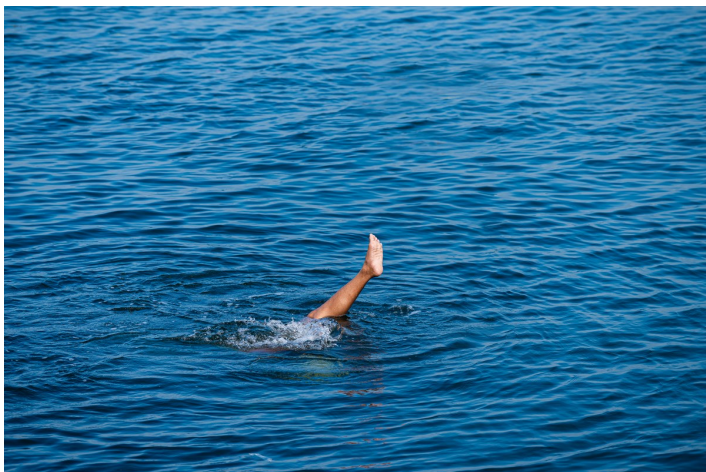
Secondly, the Kingdom of God is in the world, but it is not of the world. Martin Luther writes about this eloquently in his short piece *Temporal Authority: To what Extent it Should be Obeyed*, “What would be the result of an attempt to rule the world by the Gospel and the abolition of earthly law and force? It would be loosing savage beasts from their chains. The wicked, under cover of the Christian name would make unjust use of their Gospel freedom.”^{vi}

The Kingdom of God operates by grace, and those who enter into it have no need of temporal law. The Law of God is written upon their hearts, and so they actually go above and beyond what temporal authority calls for. However, as Luther states, there are very few true Christians, so temporal law is necessary to curb sin.

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Severed Foot Faith

by [Pr. Douglas Schoelles](#), Member of the board of Lutheran CORE



Choices, choices and AdChoices. Our hyper-consumer culture overwhelms us with all the choices we can make to please our whims. For all the hyper-individually focused advertising that is pushed at you, you as a person are lost. You are just a consumer whose only value is what you can spend.

Our Adchoice mentality affects our faith. We say we can be spiritual on our own with a custom order Jesus on our terms. This consumeristic spirituality caters to our self-centeredness. The whole “ME and Jesus” private relationship is not biblical, but blasphemous. This misguided, “Me and Jesus” spirituality not only runs counter to scripture, but even more, it degrades God’s saving work. We are redeemed as we are part of God’s people. Our ultimate communal expression is communion where we are joined to Christ and one another (1 Cor 10:17). Certainly, a self-centered spirituality will not require us to participate seriously in a church community.

If you revel in being a severed foot cut off from the body of Christ because us other Christians stink and you are more holy than us, I am offended! Who are you not to grace us with your unique embodiment of sinfulness? Who are you to think you can have Christ without us? Who are you to withhold the work of the Spirit in you to bless others for God’s glory?

The Way of Christ is not about and cannot be just a personal relationship with Jesus. Our faith has been handed down through the faith community. We are individually members of the body, the Church, but there is no severed foot faith separate from the body. The weakness of this self-centered faith in the United States is apparent from the weakness of individuals to pass along the faith.

Following Christ is not a private individualistic

affair. Yes, you are to have a personal connection to Christ. While we do have our personal and solitary times with the LORD, we are baptized and called to exercise our faith in God by how we live with one another. We are to meet together to encourage one another in the faith, rather than flying solo to be picked off one by one in spiritual warfare. (Heb 10:23-25) If even the Son of God needed a small group of disciples to do faith with, why would we think we can sever ourselves from the body and be okay?

That we are to follow Christ with one another is abundantly clear throughout the New Testament (see below). We worship together. We experience life and salvation together. We are bound together. In Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others (1 Cor 12, Rom 12:5). So, we forgive one another. We bear one another’s burdens. We share God’s love with one another. We are to be devoted to one another in love. We are to honor one another above ourselves. Rather than slacking, we are encouraged to do more and more life together as God’s people.

Don’t be a sinner alone. You are redeemed by Christ to belong to His people, not to go life alone. To be clear, if you are doing faith as a severed foot without fellow sinners, you are unbiblical and disobeying Christ. So as baptized Christians joined to the Body of Christ, actively engage your spiritual life by living it out in the temple of God’s people (1 Pet 2:4-5). Embrace the Spirit-given blessing of belonging to the family of God. Come join your brothers and sisters in Christ so you may more powerfully grow in knowing Christ in your life.

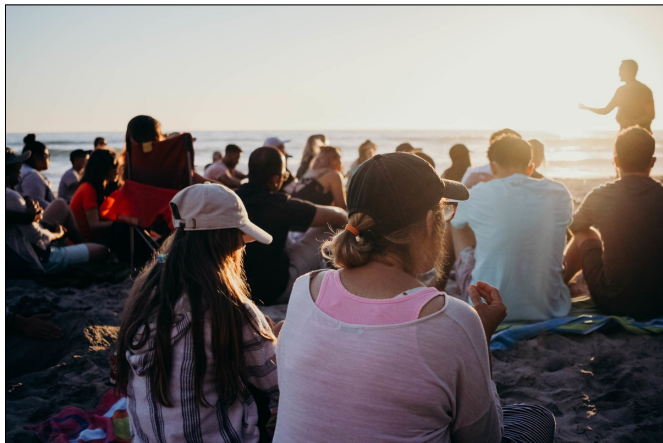
May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give y’all a spirit of unity with one another, in accordance with Christ Jesus, so that together y’all may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. (Rom. 15:5-6)

Your servant in his Church, Pastor Douglas

(See Jn 13:34, Rom 12:10, 13:8, 1 Cor 3:16-17, 12:12-14, 2 Cor 13:11, Gal 5:13, Eph 4:2, 4:32, Phil 2:5, Col 3:13, 1 Thess 4:9, 5:11, Heb 3:13, 10:23-25, 13:1, 1 Pet 1:22, 1 Pet 3:8, 1 Pet 5:5, 1 Jn 1:7, 3:23, 4:11-12)

Churches Without Property

by [Pr. David Charlton](#), Lutheran CORE Board President



In 1998, I moved with my wife and my 3 year old son to Pembroke Pines, Florida. I was sent there to start a new congregation in an area of Broward County that was located between I-75 and the Florida Everglades.

It was an exciting time, but also a little frightening. Would I have what it takes to knock on 5000 doors? Would I really be able to gather enough people to form a worshipping community within six months? Would this group of people be able to grow enough in numbers and giving to officially organize as a congregation?

The answer to each of those questions was yes! We held our first worship six months after I arrived in Pembroke Pines. There were over 100 people there on the first Sunday. Two years later, we voted to become a congregation, with over 100 members. Not only that, but our congregation was multi-cultural, reflecting the area in which we were located. Finally, we had lots of children and families. Each week, over a third of the congregation was under the age of 18.

Everything was going as planned except for one thing. We had been unable to purchase property on which to build a place to worship, hold Sunday School, adult Bible studies, and have an office. On three occasions, we almost made it, but something fell through. To this day, 25 years later, that congregation still has to rent space every Sunday to hold worship and Sunday School.

Why was it so difficult? There were several factors. Broward County was running out of land. The cities had reached the edge of the Everglades and could go no further. What land remained was at a premium. In addition, all of the land that remained was covered in muck. To develop a piece of proper-

ty, you had to “de-muck”, which means to scrape off all of the muck until you reached limestone. Then you had to re-fill the land with suitable soil for building. At the same time, you had to set aside a third or more of the property for wetlands mitigation.

However, that’s not the primary reason it was so hard for a congregation to buy property. The real reason that it was difficult was that the local municipalities, along with the county government, *did not want any more churches*. You heard that right. Churches were not wanted because they didn’t add to the tax base. Furthermore, I suspect they were seen to be sectarian and divisive in a multi-ethnic and multi-religious community. All of the things normally done by churches and synagogues could be done just as well by the schools, libraries and public parks, it was thought.

Why do I drag up the past? Because I thought at the time, and still think today, that what happened to my congregation 25 years ago may be a preview of what will happen to many congregations in the 21st Century. As church attendance drops, as more people identify as having no religious affiliation, and as the Church is seen more and more to be regressive and hateful, I expect government to seek to limit the freedom of the Church. One way to do that, among others, is through zoning and land use laws. That’s what was used in Broward County. Keep congregations from buying property and building facilities, and you limit their influence.

A further reason that I think this might be the future for many congregations is the growing denominational conflict which many of us have already experienced. Over the past 25 years, Anglicans, Lutherans and Methodists, among others, have learned again and again that they may have to choose between faithfulness to the Word of God and owning property. Sometimes, when that happens, there are enough people who have been “de-churched” to form a worshipping community. Often, however, all that remains are Christians who have no church. I have spoken to faithful Lutherans, who on being de-churched cannot find an orthodox Lutheran congregation within a reasonable driving distance.

Unless we have a model of how to “do Church” without property and buildings, many faithful Lutherans will remain de-churched. When I first faced this problem 25 years ago, there wasn’t a model available to me for doing mission without property and a building. I had to do the best I could.

At the end of the 20th Century, there were two primary models with which I was familiar. The first was the pastor centered model. The second was the

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About Congregational Singing

by [Pr. Don Brandt, *Congregations in Transition* \(CiT\)](#)

I recently attended a traditional worship service where the emotional and spiritual highlight for me was the opening and closing hymns. This was not because the sermon message was subpar (far from it), but because of the *quality of congregational singing*. The opening hymn that Sunday was “When Peace Like a River”, and the closing hymn “Stand Up, Stand Up for Jesus”.

I hesitate to bring up the importance of congregational singing, because this particular worship ministry challenge can present something of an “uneven playing field”, especially for smaller churches. So full disclosure: In the above worship service I was one of about 150 worshipers. So you could argue that my positive worship “experience” would not have been so memorable if I had been one of only 35 or 40. In fact, in *that* scenario I might have only heard my own voice during these hymns.

(Heaven forbid!)

However, I am absolutely convinced that the following worship music principle is true for congregations of virtually any size, not just mid-sized or large churches. The principle is this: ***For any church worship service that includes hymns (or contemporary songs), the quality of congregational singing will usually depend on two factors: The familiarity and popularity (among worshipers) of a given hymn.*** And this principle is just as true for a worshiping community of 50 or fewer as it is for a worship gathering of 150 or more. In fact, the fewer people present at a worship service the more awkward it is for worshipers to feel comfortable and motivated to sing aloud when the hymn is not familiar and not a “favorite”.

Here are some questions that might have already come to mind for some of you:

1. “How am I to determine my congregation’s “favorites”?” If you don’t trust your own judgment on this matter, a congregational survey might be in order. This can be done during announcements on a well-attended Sunday. Those worshipers who need more time can be invited to take the survey home and return it the following Sunday.
2. “What about when we want to introduce a new, less familiar hymn?” Unless you have an above-average vocal song leadership team to help, do *not* introduce unfamiliar compositions at the beginning or end of a worship service. You don’t want the first or last impressions of worshipers on

that Sunday to be based on trying to sing unfamiliar and potentially difficult hymns.

Instead, “teach” and

lead an unfamiliar hymn toward the middle of your service; perhaps after the sermon. And please, let them learn this hymn sitting down.

3. “What about when we have a particular yet unfamiliar hymn we want to introduce based on the lyrics alone?” Trust me on this: If your worshipers can’t sing it, it is unlikely they will appreciate the lyrics. A suggestion: Have the lyrics printed out in the bulletin (or projected), and play an audio or video recording of this composition.

There is one additional reason for selecting familiar “favorites” for your opening and closing hymns: Quality congregational singing goes a long way toward encouraging members to worship in-person rather than online. Why? Because quality online vocal worship music is, more often than not, a oxymoron. When watching online worship the viewer typically only hears the amplified voices of song leaders; or the two or three worshipers that happen to be closest to the microphone. In fact, I later watched the very same service I mentioned above online. The sermon message was just as good, but not the hymns. All I heard during the hymns was the voices of two song leaders. I could not hear the congregation at all.

So if you suspect that the quality of your congregation’s singing can be improved, I have a suggestion. If you currently draw from a list of over one hundred different compositions for your opening and closing hymns, consider this challenge: Shorten your list to the fifty hymns and songs you deem—or discern to be, through a survey—your congregation’s familiar “favorites”. Then for at least three months, only select your opening and closing hymns from this list. (Just one caveat: If your worship attendance averages less than about fifty, avoid compositions—no matter how familiar—that are beyond the vocal range of most of your worshipers.) My conviction is that, over this three-month trial period, you will be pleasantly surprised by what you hear.



Pastor Don Brandt

[Congregations in Transition](#)

[The Congregational Lay-leadership Initiative](#)

Prevailing Against the Gates

by [Pr. Brian Hughes](#) Lutheran CORE Board Vice-President



"Alderaan? I'm not going to Alderaan. I've got to get home. It's late. I'm in for it as it is."

Name that movie. Name that scene. Anyone with even a passing interest in the Star Wars franchise knows this one. It's a pivotal moment. Obi Wan asks Luke to come along, inviting him on a journey. It's the beginning of Luke's heroic journey; it's a term penned by Professor Joseph Campbell who traced such stories through history, all of which followed a certain pattern and all leading to a central task: prevailing against darkness.

George Lucas conferred with Campbell while writing the first three movies of the series. Maybe that's why most aficionados consider them the best of the nine. I find it ironic that when I first saw that movie, I looked like the kid being given a light saber. Now I'm the white-haired old guy saying, "Hey, come along this way..." and for what it's worth Luke's first response is basically, "No thanks old man, I've got to get home and work on some evaporators." In short order Luke experiences the loss of his aunt and uncle, crosses the threshold of Yes and with Obi Wan goes down into the valley of the spaceport. Lucas knew what he was about. The imagery was subtle, but followed the ancient pattern, down into the valley of the shadow of death with an outcome unknown.

At our August board meeting of Lutheran CORE, our executive director Dennis Nelson led us through a bible study on the trip to Caesarea Philippi and the question, "Who do people say the son of man is?" Dennis offered a quick survey of Simon's response, a look at the meaning of being given the keys and what that might entail, and then an insight into the gates, the gates that will not prevail against the rock. Then

Jesus gave Simon his new identity, role, and assurance, "And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it."

The thing is that gates don't take territory. They don't advance against an intruder. They attempt to hold back an incursion. Their role is to block that which is outside, like an opening in any good boundary regulates what can come in and what will go out. Why can't these gates prevail? I sat there and soaked in that insight. Of the many times I had explored that text, I asked who is Jesus in a pagan culture, what does it mean to be given the authority and therefore the power of the keys to bring life and the promise of forgiveness and eternal life? What did it mean that Peter had a sufficiently robust relationship that he could endure the challenge of being compared to Satan and standing behind? And as our walk with Jesus becomes more personal, what does it mean that we find ourselves more open to being challenged in our brokenness and sin (sin that the Gospel may release)? And then Dennis brought up the idea of prevailing against the gates. That invigorated a lively conversation around the table.

What does it take to prevail against those gates, not merely hunker down and survive, but prevail? Not in a militaristic sense, but certainly with a recognition that the church was founded to be movemental, to advance into new territory, to train and equip those who would bring the Gospel from Jerusalem, to Judea, to Samaria and all the ends of the earth. How are we doing with that in our own contexts? Were any of us trained to lead a movement? Are we prevailing? Most of us were taught to preach, teach, bring comfort to the homebound and hospitalized, baptize the children, marry the silly romantics, bury the loved ones of the grieving.

What if prevailing is more than that? In these times that often feel like we are traversing down into the valley of the shadow, *what tools did we miss in seminary that we need for the journey?* If you can find a copy of the book *In The Valley of the Shadow* by Hanns Lilje, it's worth a read. Lilje was a contemporary of Bonhoeffer—he survived his experience in the camps, later became a Bishop and wrote a catechism for adults.

Drawing from the disparate training of those on the Board, friends of CORE and others we will likely recruit, we are working on providing tasters on topics we didn't learn in seminary. During my brief stint as an assistant to the bishop in the ELCA's Sierra Pacific Synod, I was called to manage first call theological education as part of a team for region 2. Since I like

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Once You Know the Makeup ...

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time the ELCA is going to be radically different from the church body that was formed in 1988.

This is a very capable group. It includes –

- Two synodical bishops
- One seminary president
- Three ELCA college and seminary professors

Members of the commission have held such positions as –

- President of the ELCA Latino Ministries Association
- Assistant general secretary for international affairs and human rights for Lutheran World Federation
- Top leaders of Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service
- Chair of the Lutheran Campus Ministry Network
- A person who has been chair, vice chair, and secretary of the board of trustees for Portico Benefit Services
- Executive Director of South Carolina Lutheran Retreat Centers
- Member of the board of trustees and treasurer for Lutheran Outdoor Ministries
- President and chief executive officer of Mosaic (a social ministry agency which serves people with intellectual and developmental disabilities and other diverse needs)

Thirteen of these people have held positions within their synods or have served on the ELCA Church Council.

I was glad when I read comments from two of them.

- One said that “he hopes the perspectives he brings from his law practice and his work on synod and churchwide constitution committees will help him spot obstacles and identify solutions in our governing documents.”
- Another one (one of the co-chairs) described himself as having “a penchant for good governance and organizational structure.”

But beyond that, reading the bios I became more and more deeply concerned. I see this group as creating a new church body whose primary focus will be not on fulfilling the Great Commission but on social justice, LGBTQ+ and Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion activism, and where men will continue to play a

diminishing role.

For all of the talk about the equal participation of women in the church, the ELCA Church Council and this commission are obviously not concerned about the equal participation of men in the church. The commission is made up of twenty-one women and only fourteen men. Women outnumber men by 50%. And there are nearly three times as many women of color on the commission as men of color. Of the eleven people of color (eleven out of thirty-five or nearly one-third of the commission), eight are women and only three are men.

Three of the members of the commission are assistants to synodical bishops. But in each case their focus is on social justice issues and anti-racism, not on any of the other functions and ministries of a congregation. As an example, one of the members is assistant to a bishop for communications and development, but in his bio paragraph he celebrates the fact that he “has successfully centered social justice and advocacy in all aspects of communication and community engagement.”

Seven out of thirty-five (20% of the commission) hold positions of leadership within LGBTQ+ activist organizations and/or mention that they are in a same-sex married relationship. Please note: This is not saying that only 20% of them are in favor of LGBTQ+ issues. Rather it is saying that 20% of them see their being an LGBTQ+ activist as among their most prominent qualifications for being on the commission. These people include –

- A Proclaim chaplain with Extraordinary Lutheran Ministries
- Someone who has consulted with numerous synods supporting LGBTQIA+ cultural competency
- An ordained deacon at a Reconciled in Christ congregation
- The convenor of a synodical Reconciled in Christ ministry
- The director for Pride in her company’s LGBTQIA+ Business Resource Group
- Someone who has served as director of community relations for a non-profit corporation that serves the support and advocacy needs of transgender service members
- A board member and former co-chair of ReconcilingWorks
- Someone who since the age of six has “stubbornly refused to conform to society’s expectations” and whose self-description is a “genderqueer lesbian” who “seeks to bridge

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binaries and transgress borders”

Equally alarming is the fact that seven out of thirty-five (again 20% of the commission) hold positions of diversity, equity, and inclusion activism in their place of employment and/or leadership. Again this is not saying that only 20% of them make decisions and take actions based upon the principles of diversity, equity, and inclusion. Rather it is saying that a full 20% of them see their holding positions of diversity, equity, and inclusion activism in their places of employment and/or leadership as among their most prominent qualifications for being on the commission. These people include –

- A senior diversity, equity, and inclusion consultant in local government
- The chief diversity officer for a religious health organization who has received two certificates in diversity, equity, and inclusion
- A former diversity/cultural competency consultant in the non-profit sector
- The convenor for a synodical resolution on authentic diversity and inclusion
- Someone with over thirty years’ experience facilitating and training for intercultural equity leadership and organizational change
- Someone who conducted discussions about race and diversity at the 2015 and 2018 ELCA youth gatherings
- A person who is vice president of diversity and inclusion at one college after being director of diversity and inclusion at another college

This final person shows the great extent of her passion for and experience in diversity, equity, and inclusion as she writes that she has “facilitated several workshops on privilege and identity, creating inclusive learning environments, and the basics of diversity and inclusion.” In addition she has “served as a keynote speaker on topics related to diversity, equity, and inclusion,” and has “completed a year-long fellowship with the National Association of Diversity Officers in Higher Education.”

Following the principle that “once you know the makeup, you know the outcome,” it should be painfully obvious and clear what this group is going to come up with for the shape and mission of a fully reconstituted Lutheran church. We will keep you posted.

On Christian Nationalism

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Those who seek to impose the Kingdom of God by following the belief of Christian Nationalism do not fundamentally understand Christianity, and, perhaps this is why, as the authors of *Taking America Back for God* found, the religiously devout do not adhere to those beliefs.^{vii}

It would appear that a rejection of Christian Nationalism on these terms would be satisfactory, and we could simply bury the subject altogether; however, we cannot. The topic actually becomes a bit muddier when one considers there are people within society, and within the church, who use Christian Nationalism as a pejorative towards those who believe that a) the United States was founded upon Christian principles and b) that Christianity should have a privileged place in society.

Temporal law is necessary to curb sin.

Let me state unequivocally before I continue, I do not believe that Christianity should have a legally privileged place in society. That is both unconstitutional in the U.S. and would actually fall under Christian Nationalism; however, when I speak of a privileged position in society, I speak from understanding two things: 1) That, as a Christian and particularly a Lutheran, I believe that all temporal authority comes from God, and 2) without grounding the fundamental rights of humanity as well as both values and morals, in a transcendent^{viii} reality/worldview—specifically a reality/worldview that also allows respectful disagreement alongside those rights, values and morals—then a society will descend into chaos and eventually fall. Explanation is in order.

In the United States, it is understood that every individual human being is endowed with certain rights, and the founders of our nation stated clearly in the *Declaration of Independence*, those rights are self-evidently endowed by the Creator. One must ask oneself two questions: 1) Where did this idea of fundamental human rights come from? and 2) Why say that they are endowed by the Creator?

The answer to the first of these questions is: fundamental human rights including that each human had inherent value and worth came from the Judeo-Christian tradition. This is not a made up claim. You can read the histories and practices of ancient civilizations and find that only within the Judeo-Christian tradition does one find that each and every person has worth and value; each and every person is

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created in the image of God; each and every person is allotted certain protections no matter if they are an insider or an outsider. Here is the pertinent question: can a society hold onto fundamental beliefs when throwing out the very belief system that brought those beliefs into the world?

The answer to the second of these questions is: they are endowed by the Creator because if they were endowed by society or the government, then they can be taken away at the whim of society or the government. Rights that are endowed by the transcendent can only be removed by the transcendent. Rights that are endowed by the immanent^{ix} can easily be removed by the immanent. The reason the Civil Rights' Movement in the U.S. was successful is that an appeal was made to transcendent rights which superseded laws that society had implemented. Without such transcendence, one could have simply said, "The majority has spoken. Your rights are granted by the state, nothing more." There would have been no counter argument. Another pertinent question: Can a society which removes the underpinning of human rights from a transcendent Creator maintain human rights for everyone?

The answers to these two questions begin pointing us towards the reason Christianity should have a privileged place in society. However, there is one more addition that must be made. Christianity not only ensures fundamental human rights and grounds those rights in a transcendent reality, it also provides a moral framework which allows for disagreement and respect towards those who hold different positions. Christians understand that we treat fellow Christians as family—this language permeates the New Testament, but what about those who are not in our Christian family? They are our neighbors, and we are commanded to love our neighbors as ourselves—love being agape, the Greek word for a self-sacrificial love which calls for sacrificing ourselves for the sake of our neighbor. There is a further call to love one's enemies--again using the same Greek word. Hatred and demonization of enemies; of the other; of someone outside one's preferred group, is forbidden within Christian thought. Is there another philosophy or religion which goes so far?

Certainly not the godless, postmodern society which is rapidly gaining ground within our culture. Postmodern thought has removed the idea of transcendence and has made everything immanent, and, unfortunately, even some within the church buy into this particular philosophical framework. It is much to

society's detriment.

Let us return to the opening story of this article: Santino Burrola and his subsequent firing for wanting to stop thieves. What philosophy/worldview undergirds the idea that thieves should be allowed to take goods unchecked? What philosophy/worldview undergirds the idea that those who seek to stop stealing should be punished? It's not the Christian worldview. It's not the worldview which undergirded the United States from its inception. There is something else at play. There is another stream of thought which is being privileged. In this case, it is the postmodern worldview/philosophy which somehow has accepted theft and demeaned those who try to stop it. It would seem self-evident that privileging this philosophy/worldview is not good for society in the long run. In fact, it will lead to chaos.

As the great Catholic apologist G.K. Chesterson once said, "When men choose not to believe in God, they do not thereafter believe in nothing, they then become capable of believing in anything."^x A culture or society which does not believe in God, or at least have human rights rooted in a transcendent Creator, will then become capable of believing anything including that theft should be allowed and those who seek to protect another's property should be punished.

It would behoove those who try to lump those who strongly adhere to the beliefs that the United States was founded upon Christian principles and that Christianity should have a privileged place in society to understand why we say such things and not simply dismiss us by pejoratively calling us Christian Nationalists. We're not. We're Christians, Lutherans, and citizens who love our country and what it stands for. We want our country to be a place where justice, fairness, and freedom thrive. We are convinced that in order for this to happen, we must have a shared understanding of human rights, values, and morals; and we are convinced by history, philosophy, and faith that this will be impossible without this being grounded in a transcendent reality which allows for disagreement.

Is there a better grounding than Christianity? I don't think so.

ⁱ<https://www.cbsnews.com/colorado/news/king-soopers-employee-fired-video-theft/>

ⁱⁱ<https://sas.rutgers.edu/news-a-events/news/newsroom/faculty/3406-religious-nationalism>

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**Christianity is
invitational *not*
impositional.**

Churches Without Property

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program centered model. Both of those depend on a congregation owning property and facilities. In the pastor centered model, the congregation gathered each week for worship and fellowship. The pastor did ministry to and for the members in the building owned by the congregation. (Evangelism consisted of the pastor visiting individuals in the community.)

The program centered model also required property and facilities, but more than what was owned by a pastoral centered congregation. It was through the varied programs that the congregation did ministry to its members and reached out to the unchurched. The better the programs and the more varied, the more people could be reached. More than one called pastor and multiple lay ministers were required to run the programs of the congregation. In order for all of this to happen, however, adequate facilities were a must.

When I was a pastor developer, property was key to the viability of a new church. Generally speaking, the pastor developer was expected to locate more than 5 acres for purchase. That's because the goal was for new congregations to grow beyond the pastor centered model to the program centered model. You'll need more than 5 acres to build the facilities to sustain a program centered congregation. On more than one occasion, I heard of a mission congregation that was shut down because it couldn't find enough land. In spite of what was said about "the Church is not a building", buildings were considered essential.

I fear that if the Lutheran Church in the 21st Century follows that model, it will be difficult to plant enough new congregations to reach the thousands of un-churched Lutherans in North America. Even less will it be adequate to do the kind of mission that is required in our post-Christian society. What models do we have for starting new congregations today? What models do we have for a time when there are not enough pastors? Not enough land? Not enough facilities? Do we simply say, "Starting a new congregation here is not a viable option?"

Of equal importance is the question of how to grow a congregation. What alternatives are there to the traditional Sunday School model, with accompanying Children's and Youth programs? *Can a program model of ministry be replaced by a disciple making model?* Are there creative ways to raise up pastors and lay ministers in places where a pastor can't be afforded? We need answers to those questions if we want to do mission in the 21st Century.

Prevailing Against the Gates

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to be data driven when it comes to providing training and support, I got all our first call pastors together, asked how it was going, and what do they think they missed? I heard an earful. So many things. And that was twenty-five years ago.

Since then, we've experienced the sexuality wars, the worship wars, the decline of Christianity numerically in the US, Covid, rising racial tensions, massive rejection of the faith by a younger generation (half of GenZ claiming to be agnostic or atheist)ⁱ, family brokenness splashing out onto all the mediating structures of society including the church. Etcetera. These tasters could be provided live on Zoom and recorded for later viewing. We could interact via a social media platform as we figure out how to use what we're learning. Some of the topics being considered are:

- 1) visionary leadership, the power of casting a vision and how to do so
- 2) how to reach multiple cultures in our contexts including how to maintain core values amid an influx of new members
- 3) how to be a church that can reach new people, a look at everything from Celtic models to multi-generational faith formation
- 4) how to mobilize faith for mission and ministry within the congregation and in the mission field of their daily lives
- 5) managing conflict and boundaries
- 6) creating healthy staff teams
- 7) creating leadership pipelines for disciples who know how to make disciples, for small groups and missional communities
- 8) balancing personal life and strengthening the emotional side of pastoral life
- 9) worship, preaching and leading transitions to discipling culture church
- 10) developing a giving church and a church built on prayer

In the months ahead we will test a number of pilot offerings to see if we are on the right track. If any of these topics are interesting to you, please let us know. If there are other areas of stress send us a note about that also.

The gates of hell shall not prevail "for lo! his doom is sure; one little word shall fell him." All of us in leadership in the church heard the call, crossed into

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On Christian Nationalism

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ⁱⁱⁱIbid.

^{iv}<https://www.elca.org/News-and-Events/7996>

^vI do not deal with this caveat in the article as it is not a theological point; however, this Pew article (<https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2022/10/27/views-of-the-u-s-as-a-christian-nation-and-opinions-about-christian-nationalism/>) shows that even within the African-American and Hispanic communities a majority of members of those communities support the statement that the founders of the U.S. meant for this to be a Christian Nation. Not only that, the majority of African-American Protestants believe that the U.S. should be a Christian nation. This caveat is actually not based in reality, but is based in an attempt to simply discredit Christian Nationalism by tying it to white supremacy without actually dealing with any arguments.

^{vi}Luther, Martin. Temporal Authority: To What Extent it Should be Obeyed. Luther's Works Volume 45. P.91.

^{vii}<https://learn.elca.org/jle/taking-america-back-for-god-christian-nationalism-in-the-united-states-and-andrew-l-whitehead-and-samuel-l-perry/>

^{viii}Something that is above and beyond or outside ourselves and this universe as we know it.

^{ix}Those things found within the universe as we know it.

^x<https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/44015-when-men-choose-not-to-believe-in-god-they-do>

Prevailing Against the Gates

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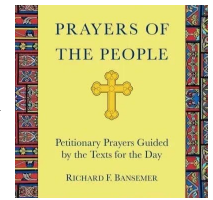
the journey, and now find ourselves on paths unknown to destinations uncharted. May we do so while knowing that Jesus' love is always supporting us, and his hand is guiding us.



ⁱ<https://www.aei.org/articles/perspective-why-even-secular-people-should-worry-about-gen-zs-lack-of-faith/#:~:text=Pew%20Research%20repeatedly%20found%20that,boomers%20and%20the%20Silent%20Generation.>

Prayers of the People

by [Paul Sauer](#), American Lutheran Publishing Bureau Executive Director



In this book Richard F. Barsemer has collected these prayers, which he has written over several years, for every Sunday of the church year as well as a number of additional holy days. His intention is that these Prayers of the People might help congregations each week to engage in the conversation with God that is true prayer. In the Prayer of the Church, having heard God speaking through the reading of Holy Scripture and its exposition through the sermon, the people then bring before God their response to what has been said, in a way that expresses their hope, thanksgiving, admiration, struggle and joy. The scripture lessons to which the prayers relate are those in the three-year Revised Common Lectionary (RCL), now in wide use by Christian denominations which follow a lectionary, including most Lutherans, in the United States and Canada. The cost of the book is \$11.00 plus postage. All the prayers are available in digital form free of charge to owners of the book to facilitate adaptation. Requests for the digital files may be sent to the ALPB via email to Donna Roche at dkralpb@aol.com.

A QR code for easy ordering is on the right! Or click [here](#) to purchase via their website.



Coming Events

- **LCMC 23rd Annual Gathering & Convention** — St. Charles, MO. October 1-4, 2023. Click [here](#).
- **Pro Ecclesia Conference**—Beeson Divinity School, Birmingham, AL. June 10-12, 2024. Click [here](#).
- **NEXUS 2024**—Des Moines, IA. July 21-27, 2024. Click [here](#).
- **NALC Online Convocation**. August 9, 2024. Click [here](#).

More events: <http://lutherancore.website/events/future/>

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To contact Lutheran CORE, please email lcrowebmail@gmail.com or call 1-888-810-4180