

What Are They Actually Accomplishing?

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



AN ANALYSIS OF THE WORK OF THE ELCA'S COMMISSION FOR A RENEWED LUTHERAN CHURCH

As promised, we continue to monitor the work of the ELCA's Commission for a Renewed Lutheran Church (CRLC). The 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 "comprised of leaders of diverse representation" that shall "reconsider the statements of purpose for each of the expressions of this church, the principles of its organizational structure, and all matters pertaining thereunto." The Commission was instructed to be "particularly attentive to our shared commitment to dismantle racism" and to "present its findings and recommendations to the 2025 Churchwide Assembly in preparation for a possible reconstituting convention."

There was a very interesting article in "Living Lutheran," the ELCA's digital magazine, dated August 2, 2023 and entitled "Inside the commission that could restructure the ELCA." [Here](#) is a link to that article. The article begins by comparing the original Commission for a New Lutheran Church, which met between 1982 and 1987 and whose work led to the formation of the ELCA, and this recently appointed Commission for a Renewed Lutheran Church. According to the article, the original Commission (from the 1980's) was "a mam-

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- Filling your congregation's pastoral vacancy
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Woke? Awake; the Sacred's Changing

by [Pr. Brett Jenkins](#), NALC pastor from Pennsylvania and former board member of Lutheran CORE

Although the appellation “woke”—used by Ricky Gervais to the Hollywood establishment at the Oscars as “insider” language just a few years ago—is eschewed by progressives now that cultural conservatives have fastened onto it and redeployed it as a demeaning epithet, its inception in progressive circles originally indicated a true stance of religious conversion that Christians should recognize. As the Church year winds to its eschatologically focused close and begins the new year in Advent, both Jesus and John the Baptist exhort us to “wake” up to the reality of our spiritual situation. Such an awakening is at once a combination of intellectual recognition and a posture of preparation for incipient action. “Woke” originally meant to the true believer in progressive ideals much the same thing that “newly illumined” meant to the just baptized in the early Church; it signaled the passing of a liminal threshold and the adoption of such a substantially new interpretation of age-old data points and orientation to the challenges of life as to be only capturable in the proclamation of a new identity.

It is not particularly provocative or insightful to interpret the constellation of ideological commitments that goes variously by the names woke, post-modern, poststructuralism, or social justice as a religion, but it is helpful to explore why this is formally rather than merely experientially the case. If religion is defined sociologically as a set of communal behaviors rather than as a set of metaphysical beliefs or commitments (a hopelessly Western definition in any case), this progressive set of beliefs above-labeled clearly functions as a religion for its adherents.

Channeling the work of Émile Durkheim, Jonathan Haidt helpfully identifies the sociological characteristics of a religion. By designating something as “sacred” a group of disparate people can have a sense of unified identity. You know you are in the presence of a thing (or value system) that has been designated by a group as “sacred” when that thing must be defended at all costs from even ridiculous or accidental insults. “Jokes, insults, and utilitarian trade-offs” cannot be tolerated if they impugn the honor of the thing held sacred because they threaten the fundamental social cohesion of the group’s acolytes. When what is at stake is the sacred, blasphemy codes dictate the range of acceptable expression, and such cannot be challenged by rational objections.

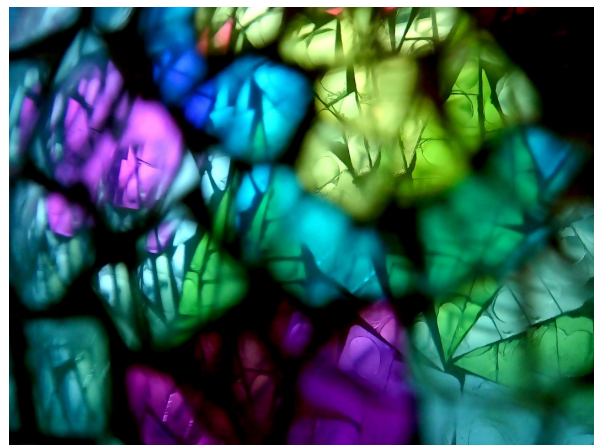
In a lecture at Duke University, Haidt identified six groups that are now identified as sacred in the so-

cial justice milieu: the “big three” of blacks, women, and LGBTQIA+ along with a secondary group deemed slightly less sacred consisting of Latinos, Native Americans, people with disabilities, and more recently, Muslims. Comments or ideas that are deemed less than laudatory of people in these groups or their behavior are met not only with outrage but disgust, an emotional response whose purpose is to get us to avoid things that are potentially poisonous to us—contagions and pathogens.

I spoke in [last issue’s article](#) of not permitting the pain of a student in my care—very real pain for which I had genuine empathy and wanted to see healed—to colonize my theology, coming to exercise a controlling influence over it. Viruses colonize their host by hijacking the cell’s DNA reproduction system, turning its very system of replication and renewal to its own purposes. The reason why progressive Christianity quickly ceases to be Christianity at all is that the Church’s ministries of renewal and replication—catechesis and evangelism—are necessarily reemployed in service of the new objects that are, in fact, now deemed sacred.

In the case of progressive Christianity, the aforementioned victim groups replace the orthodox objects of worship (the Triune God, revealed by the life, teaching, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ) as the center around which the group’s identity revolves. In the same way, the holy tasks of pursuing an amorphously defined and ever-mutating sense of justice for these sacred victims replaces the orthodox tasks of preaching the stories of Scripture and celebrating the Sacraments commanded by God’s Sacred Victim, as well as the repentance, conversion, and amendment of life according to the revealed will of God to which these lead.

Progressive Christianity quickly ceases to be formally Christian precisely because it holds different things to be sacred than does the Biblical, Apostolic faith. I will have more to say on this in the next issue, but for now it is enough to note that it represents a different religion, not a different way to be Christian.



A Father's Wise Instruction

by Pr. Douglas Schoelles, NALC Pastor in Indiana and
Lutheran CORE Board Member



Do you worry if your children will be wise when they go off to live in this corrupted world? Have you given them the foundation they need? Jesus said our world is under attack by forces seeking to destroy you and your children. This battle is happening in Christian families as they allow the breach in their Christian practice. As families attend worship less, as parents and children pray and read the Bible less, and as families stay together as families less, the breach in our lives widens.

“Hear, O sons, a father’s instruction, and be attentive, that you may gain insight.” (Proverbs 4:1) Your spiritual path is the greatest factor of your child’s spiritual path. If a father goes regularly, regardless of the practice of the mother, between 2/3 and 3/4 of their children will become churchgoers (regular and irregular). But, if a father does not go to church — no matter how faithful his wife’s devotion — only one child in 50 (1/50) will become a regular worshipper.

Part of the reason for this distinction is that children tend to take their cues about domestic life from Mom while their conceptions of the outside world come from Dad. If Dad takes faith in God seriously then the message to their children is that God *should* be taken seriously. My dad, Richard, who worked long hours as a foreman in a Chevrolet factory, made sure his kids knew the value of faith.

One of the key reasons for Christian families faltering under the attacks of Satan is that many Christian men have not been willing to “step into the breach” — to fill this gap that lies open and vulnerable to further attack.

“And I sought for a man among them who should build up the wall and stand in the breach before Me

for the land ...” says the LORD. (Ezekiel 22:30) MEN ... these are the times in which you and I live ... this is the hand we have been dealt. Are we standing in the breach for our children?

Do you think it is easier or more difficult to be a child growing up in these times? How much have you taken for granted the spiritual grounding your elders gave you? Are you making sure your child has at least as much spiritual grounding in this more god-less age?

- What wisdom are you imparting to your children, even if they are grown up?
- Are you leading your sons and daughters in the path of wisdom? (Prov 4:2-13)
- Or do you let your progeny, your precious children, wander around to follow the ways of the world? (Proverbs 4:14-19)

“Men do not hesitate to engage in the battle that is raging around you, the battle that is wounding our children and families, the battle that is distorting the dignity of both women and men. This battle is often hidden, but the battle is real. It is primarily spiritual, but it is progressively killing the remaining Christian ethos in our society and culture, and even in our own homes.” (Bishop Thomas Olmsted)

Men, you are to love your wives as Christ loves the church, modeling the love of the Father in their most important earthly relationship. (Eph 5:25-30) Men, as fathers, you are to care for your children as your heavenly Father cares for you.

- How are you the spiritual protector of your wife and children?
- How are you training your family for spiritual battle now and in the future?
- How are you leading your family through the spiritual attacks?

As the father you play a primary role in teaching your children the truth about reality. (Eph 6:2-4) Men, you are the one who should instruct your children to understand the world from a consciously and informed Christian worldview. So, impart life-giving wisdom to your children as you send them into the world with a biblical view of reality and a faith in Jesus Christ that is rooted in solid example.

Now may the God of peace who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, equip you with everything good that you may do his will, working in you that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen. (Hebrews 13:20-21)

Pastor Douglas

Addressing the Clergy Supply Crisis

by [Pr. Don Brandt, Congregational Lay-Led Initiative \(CLI\)](#)

Given the increasing shortage of ordained pastors available for call, **now is the time when many churches will need to take the initiative to enlist one or two (or three) active members to be equipped and eventually called to serve their own congregation.**

Now before you dismiss this strategy as totally impractical, first consider the difficulties involved in finding and calling a full-time ordained pastor in the next few years. Then I will describe one possible scenario where a congregation chooses to equip and call one or two (or three) of their own members to serve in a pastoral role.

So first, to answer the question: just how difficult could it be in 2024, or 2025, to fill your congregation's pastoral vacancy? Glad you asked. The answer, in part, comes down to basic math. There are simply too many vacancies for too few available pastors. And the small number of pastors who **are** looking for a call have too many options. This means applicants for your vacancy will often be comparing your church with other vacant churches where they are also interviewing.

However, it is not just about the *quantity* of available pastors, it's often about the *quality*. Many of the pastors out "looking" are not vetted; and might not be qualified to serve your church. This is especially true in the LCMC, where their online "call packet" information makes it clear that vetting your applicants is entirely your congregation's responsibility.

One more challenge related to the current clergy supply shortage: it will only become more severe in the coming years. Projections are that there will be twice as many pastors retiring ten years from now than are retiring in 2024.

So now for a *hypothetical* example of how a congregation—Grace Lutheran—is addressing its pastoral vacancy. It involves the following steps:

1. Once the congregation's retiring pastor—who served Grace for 15 years—departed, the Church Council organized a transition team to consider how to move forward when the larger church is dealing with an unprecedented clergy shortage. That transition team, after meeting for a couple of months, recommends that the Council pursue a two-prong strategy to address their vacancy. First, they recommend organizing a call committee to "test the waters" regarding whether the "right" pastor is out there; whether to serve as an interim or more "permanent"



pastor. The second recommendation is that, while the call committee begins this search, the Council begin a discernment process as to whether one or two (or three) active members can be convinced and recruited to take at least one seminary online course. This initial course would be a way for these members to consider a seminary education and, hopefully, eventual ordination. The cost of this seminary course would be covered by the congregation.

2. The Council's first challenge is, of course, one of discernment. In other words, identifying the right members to approach regarding this opportunity. Prayer would play a large role as the Council moves forward. Those considered would be active members who are already known by name by the majority of church members. Just as important, they would be members who are recognized as having proven ministry gifts.

3. Given the long-term scope of this strategy, those approached would ideally be 60 years of age or younger. That way they would potentially be able to serve the congregation in a pastoral role for years to come.

4. Those approached and recruited for this ministry opportunity would hopefully have a college degree. This would make them immediately able to pursue a seminary education without additional schooling.

5. These future pastoral ministers could either be currently working full-time (after all it's only one initial online course) or part-time; or be active retired; or be a nesting-stage or empty-nester parent not working outside the home; or currently be serving the church as support staff.

6. Which initial seminary course would they be taking? Negotiable. I would recommend either Biblical studies, preaching, or Lutheran Confessions.

7. Who would these "recruits" be accountable to as they begin this online course? Either the Church

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Free Webinar— “Planning as a Paradigm Shift”

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



Wednesday, September 25—11 AM EDT

In addition to alerting people to ways in which the ELCA is going further and further off the rails, we of Lutheran CORE see as part of our work providing encouragement and resources for congregations and their leaders and lay members.

Lutheran CORE is about to embark on providing a new series of resources – webinars on church leadership and ministry led by practitioners who know what they are talking about because they will be sharing insights and approaches that they have learned from their own ministry experience and have put into practice in their own ministry settings. Many thanks to three members of the board – NALC pastors Brian Hughes, David Charlton, and Doug Schoelles - for articulating and developing the vision for this new ministry and doing the work to bring it to life.

The first webinar, entitled “Planning as a Paradigm Shift,” will be offered on Wednesday, September 25 from 11 AM to 12 noon Eastern Daylight Time. Lutheran CORE vice president Brian Hughes says concerning the webinar, **“Planning is deciding about a preferred future, especially when it comes to creating faithful disciples.”** He also said, “Planning for ministry means setting priorities which might, even in the best and healthiest of situations, require pruning something in order to add a new emphasis.” He also shared that as we deal with the diminishment of our ministry amid the accelerating de-churching of America, church leaders need to figure out what path to take and how to convince others to join.

When asked why this webinar series starts with planning, Brian answered, “Planning assumes we’ve looked at our current reality and want to be somewhere else. What is not working and what do we

want to be about that’s different?” When asked whether this webinar is a one-time event, he replied, “This is a taster offered by Lutheran CORE that will likely become a monthly offering with more content and other presenters already in the wings depending on the response and needs we hear.”

Brian Hughes is a retired pastor now rostered with the NALC and living in South Carolina. After serving ELCA congregations in places like Capitol Hill (Washington DC), Pittsburgh PA, and the Bay Area of California, he finished up with almost twenty years in Columbia MD. For several years he served as assistant to the bishop in the ELCA’s Sierra Pacific Synod (northern California and western Nevada) with seminary candidacy and first call leadership development as part of his portfolio. He continues to be part of a movement of reintroducing faith formation into homes, multi-generationally. After retiring from his ELCA congregation in Maryland in 2019 (where they had nine services a weekend in five languages) he launched an NALC street ministry in Baltimore that evolved into leading a Sunday morning worship service in a strip club. His former congregation in Maryland is now LCMC. He currently serves as vice president of the board of Lutheran CORE. Mission and discipleship have been his passions throughout his entire ministry.

[Here](#) is a link to register for this webinar. There is no charge for attending.

Scan Here to Reach CORE's Website



Coming Events

- **Free Webinar “Planning as a Paradigm Shift”** — September 25, 2024. Click [here](#).
- **LCMC 24th Annual Gathering & Convention** — Marion, IA. September 29- October 2, 2024. Click [here](#).
- **NALC Lutheran Week 2025**—Pittsburgh, PA. August 3, 2025—Aug 8, 2025. Click [here](#).

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

What Are They Actually ...

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moth research project that held forums across the country, reviewed over 12,000 letters from Lutheran faithful, and processed responses from the synod, district and national conventions of three Lutheran denominations hoping to merge.” The original Commission was composed of seventy persons who spent five years doing their work. In contrast, the current Commission will have less than two years to complete its work. The article in “Living Lutheran” says, “The new group of 35 rostered ministers and laypeople from across the church will conduct a more condensed version of the original group’s investigation, examining ‘statements of purpose’ and ‘principles of organization’ for all three expressions and conducting nationwide research and listening forums.”

A [Timeline](#) for the work of the Commission can be found on their website. Here are some key dates.

The Churchwide Assembly that directed the Church Council to form the Commission was held August 8-12, 2022.

It was not until January-March 2023 that there was a nominating process for members for the Commission.

On April 20, 2023 the ELCA Church Council appointed members to the Commission.

On June 20, 2023 the Executive Committee appointed Leon Schwartz and Carla Christopher as co-chairs of the Commission.

It was not until July 13-15, 2023 that the Commission held its first meeting – almost a full year after the assembly which directed the Church Council to form the Commission and just a little more than two years before the July 28-August 2, 2025 Churchwide Assembly, which will vote on the recommendations from the Commission. But the Commission needs to complete its work well before then. Here are a couple more very significant dates coming up very soon which are on the Commission’s Timeline –

Spring 2025 – A draft of the Commission’s report and recommendations is to be shared with the Conference of Bishops for comment.

April 3-6, 2025 – The Commission’s final report and recommendations are to be shared with the Church Council, who will forward the report and recommendations to the 2025 Churchwide Assembly for the assembly’s consideration.

The “Living Lutheran” article is filled with hope and anticipation. It quotes from the memorial submitted by the Northern Texas-Northern Louisiana Synod, which says, “The governing documents, con-

stitutions, bylaws, and continuing resolutions of the ELCA do not allow (congregations, synods and the churchwide organization) to reorganize quickly to meet the changing realities for effective mission in today’s world.” According to the article the other nine synods which submitted memorials used similar language.

The article shares comments made by Carla Christopher and Leon Schwartz, the two co-chairs of the Commission, in a sit-down interview after the first meeting of the Commission.

Carla Christopher said, “Church itself has changed. The people coming to church have changed, and the systems necessary to support the work the church is doing have changed. . . . We want to make sure that churchwide is resourcing the best places where mission is happening and innovation is happening, that synods have the ability to support and address and equip rostered (ministers) for the future, that seminaries have relevant curriculum, and that parishioners have the ability to be active and involved even if they’re not traditional parishioners.”

Both Christopher and Schwartz told stories of a “church struggling to react quickly in a century when crisis is becoming the norm.” Leon Schwartz added, “When the churchwide assembly meets every three years, and that’s the only chance you have to change the constitution, it’s very cumbersome. Even bylaws or continuing resolutions, they take a lot of time to change anything.”

Christopher cited numerous examples of the “church’s command structure breaking down” during the COVID lockdowns of 2020-21. According to the article, neither co-chair would say that the decades-old model of three expressions is fundamentally flawed, but they did state that many areas of ministry do not fit under any of the three expressions. These ministries include camps, colleges and universities, interfaith engagement, and environmental agencies. Schwartz commented, “There’s a lot of things that have just grown up over the past 40 years.”

Leon Schwartz pointed out that the original Commission (from the 1980’s) “took six years to collect its data whereas the new commission is down to about a year and a half before its report comes due.” Therefore he “lamented that so much time had elapsed already.” “It’s a different environment,” he said. “You can’t take six years to make changes anymore in this world.”

This same attitude of hope and anticipation continues as the article says, “When the next churchwide assembly convenes, in summer 2025, the CRLC will present its findings and recommend whether the

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church should then mount a special reconstituting convention without delay.” I do not remember the words “without delay” being in the original motion.

If all that is the hope, dream, plan, goal, anticipated outcome, and reason for which the Commission was formed, what is the reality? As of the time of the writing of this article, the Commission has met six times – three times in 2023 and three times in 2024. Three of the meetings were in person; three were online. The plan is that the Commission will meet twice a year in person and online every other month during the other months. [Summaries](#) of the first six meetings can be found on the Commission’s website.

I have read, studied, and reflected on the written summaries of the first six meetings of the Commission. I noticed that earlier summaries were more specific in their content. For example, the Commission revealed their priorities through whom they invited to address them. They also mentioned their receiving a copy of the DEIA audit which the ELCA had done of their governing documents. They have not stated what impact that audit will have on their final report and recommendations. But the two members who held a listening session for the synod in which I am rostered celebrated the fact that the ELCA is the first of its kind of organization to have such an audit done.

For me, the summaries of the more recent meetings are very general and non-informative. They speak of such things as reviewing highlights from listening sessions and online surveys, holding listening sessions at the recent youth gathering and adjacent events, identifying essential functions of the three expressions of the church, hearing from synods about their functions, ensuring that their work is viewed through a lens of antiracism, and discussing the current seal and name of the ELCA. Nothing specific is said. Reading the summaries tells you nothing about what actually is being done and is going on.

I can think of two possible explanations. First, they are not getting a whole lot done. They have grand ideas but do not know how to make those ideas a reality. After more than half of the time has passed between their first meeting and when they need to give their report and recommendations to the Church Council, they are spinning their wheels.

There is also a second possibility. They are intentionally not telling us what actually is going on and specifically in what direction they are heading. For example, they are not disclosing how the ELCA’s DEIA audit will impact their recommenda-

tions. This possibility reminds me of how quickly the recordings of the evening sessions from the recent youth gathering were removed from the internet.

Either way, I see and have a problem and will continue to keep you informed.

Addressing the Clergy ... Crisis

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Council or a mentoring team of two to four lay leaders appointed by the Council.

8. What would the financial cost be to the congregation? Minimal. Initially, just the cost of the online seminary course(s). However if these members are also recruited to serve in some ministerial role while taking this course, they should be given a stipend as compensation.

I have, since 2019, provided some level of assistance to 38 different congregations dealing with a pastoral vacancy. Most of these congregations initially approached their vacancy with the assumption that finding and calling a new pastor is essentially the same challenge it was ten to twenty years ago.

Nothing could be further from the truth. The current shortage of qualified pastors available for call is unprecedented in my lifetime. (And I’m seventy-two!)

This crisis is not something that can be entirely addressed by top-down denominational strategies. Not only are such top-down strategies inadequate in 2024; they will be increasingly insufficient as long as the number of available pastors continues to plummet in the coming years.

So if top-down, national-church initiatives prove

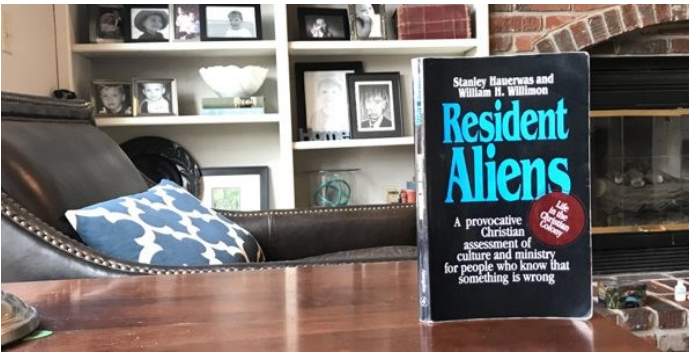


inadequate, what can the local church dealing with a vacancy possibly do? **Take ownership** in addressing

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Video Ministries—Sept. 2024

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



“RESIDENT ALIENS: LIFE IN THE CHRISTIAN COLONY”

A video book review by Douglas Schoelles

Many thanks to Douglas Schoelles, pastor of St. John's Lutheran Church in Fort Wayne, Indiana (NALC) and member of the board of Lutheran CORE, for giving us a video review of the book, “Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony” by Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989). A link to Doug's review can be found [here](#). A link to our You Tube channel, which contains reviews of around three dozen books as well as a dozen CORE Convictions videos on various topics related to the Christian faith and life, can be found [here](#).

Doug writes: “While this book has been out thirty-five years, it is worth the read because the points Hauerwas and Willimon make are more salient than ever. Congregations will need to see themselves as unique faith communities set apart in our neo-pagan, post-Christian society. Paganism permeates our society, filling our thoughts, converting our youth, and subverting the church. Efforts to accommodate the society whether with liberals or cultural conservatives is an empty effort to underwrite American societies. The message of the church is not for ourselves, but for the whole world. As an incarnation of Christ, our purpose and only significance is a vessel of the Gospel which God uses to bring hope and salvation to the whole world.”

Doug continues: “In our world where loneliness and detachment are epidemic many people are searching for a rooted tradition. Do we offer that? ‘With our emphasis on the narrative nature of Christian life, we are saying that salvation is baptism into a community that has so truthful a story that we forget ourselves and our anxieties long enough to become part of that story, a story God has told in

Scripture and continues to tell in Israel and the Church’ (Hauerwas & Willimon, p. 59). As we are baptized to be priests we are commissioned to help people in the name of Jesus, not do-gooders who help people. We are called to be a community of disciples who believe the gospel and are shaped by it.”

Doug concludes: “The authors did not anticipate some twists of history, but much of what they forecast is spot on.”

Addressing the Clergy ... Crisis

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your long-term need for pastoral leadership. In other words, “raise up” competent and gifted future pastoral leaders from among your own congregational members.

And if your church is, or soon will be facing a pastoral vacancy, where do you begin? By doing four things:

1. Read this article a second time.
2. Start praying; asking God for guidance when it comes to identifying active members of your church who have the personal integrity and the proven ministry gifts to consider becoming a pastor.
3. Approach your congregational leaders about considering some version of the above ministry strategy.
4. And if you initially need to talk with someone who is **not** a part of your congregation about how to proceed, **email me**, Don Brandt, at pastor-donbrandt@gmail.com.

For an additional written resource related to this ministry challenge you can click on the link below.

Grace and peace,

Pastor Don Brandt

Lutheran CORE's Congregational Lay-leadership Initiative (CLI)

[“How Your Congregation Can Identify, Enlist and Train Part-time Lay Ministers”](#)

CORE Voice Newsletter

Published by Lutheran CORE;

[Kim Smith](#), Editor

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