

The

EVANGEL

Epiphany





From the Editor

Happy New Year! For me, the start of a new year always prompts some reflection questions: What did the past year bring? What was difficult? What was a blessing? How did God care for us through it all?

This year's themes in *The Evangel* will be centered on the Seasons in the Church Year: Epiphany, Lent, Easter, Pentecost, High Feast Days, and Advent and Christmas.

In this first issue, Rev. Dr. Cary Larson lays the groundwork for why the Lutheran church continues to celebrate these seasons. Rev. Joe Marsh provides an introduction to the season of Epiphany. Then Rev. Irv Stapf and Rev. Ray Lorthioir work through two of the gospel texts for Sundays in Epiphany.

As we look into God's Word for the significance of each season, may the reminders of His great power and love through centuries of guiding His people, lead us to look forward to how He will care for us in the coming year.

No, the coming year will not be perfect. Life never is. But we can look up in peace. No matter what comes our way, "The Lord is near" (Phil 4:5 NIV).

"O God, Our Help in Ages Past"

O God, our help in ages past,
Our hope for years to come,
Our shelter from the stormy blast,
And our eternal home:

Under the shadow of your throne
Your saints have dwelt secure;
Sufficient is your arm alone,
And our defense is sure.

Before the hills in order stood
Or Earth received her frame,
From everlasting you are God,
To endless years the same.¹

God's peace be with you,

Gretchen Baker

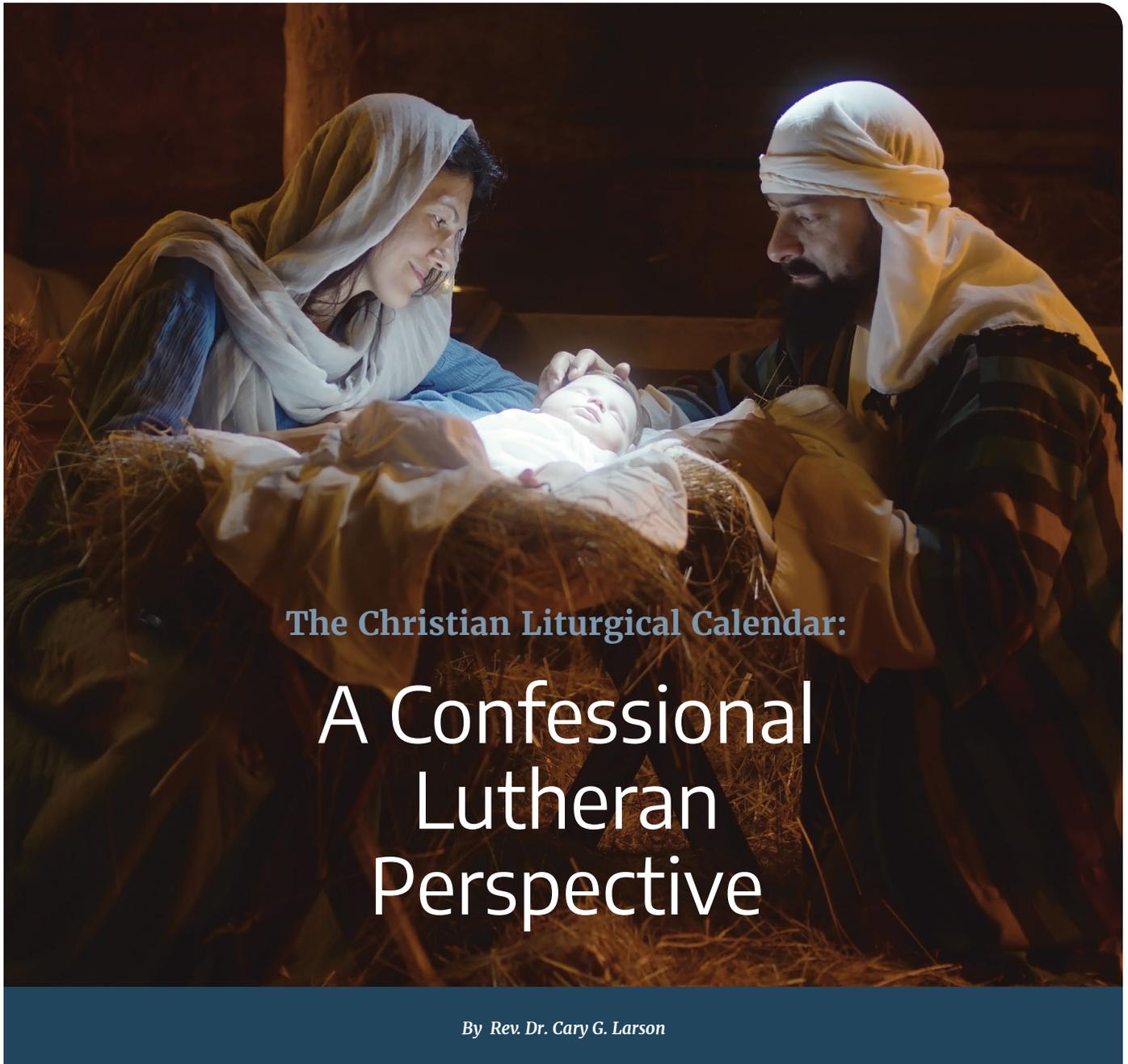
Gretchen Baker
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¹ Isaac Watts, "Oh God, Our Help in Ages Past," https://hymnary.org/text/our_god_our_help_in_ages_past_watts



The Christian Liturgical Calendar:

A Confessional Lutheran Perspective

By Rev. Dr. Cary G. Larson

The Christian Liturgical Calendar, often referred to as the “Church Year,” is a cyclical framework that structures worship around the life, death, resurrection, and ongoing work of Christ Jesus, as well as the Christian life and faith in Him. Rooted in ancient Christian tradition and faithfully maintained following the Reformation, this yearly cycle provides a rhythmic guide to our spiritual lives, embedding Christian teachings in daily devotion and communal worship.

The Liturgical Calendar is more than just a schedule of seasons and festivals; it is a foundational, Christ-centered, instructive tool. That is, a yearly reaffirmation of the Gospel that grounds the Christian not in one’s own works or feelings, but in the finished work of Christ Jesus. Its significance lies in its role as a steady anchor, continually driving the worshipping Christian

back to the forgiveness of sins delivered through God’s Word and Sacraments.

The primary purpose of the Liturgical Calendar is distinctly Christocentric (Christ at the center). The liturgical year begins with the anticipation of Advent, leading to celebrating the incarnation of Christ Jesus at Christmas, emphasizing the central truth that God entered humanity for the sake of our salvation. This theme progresses through Epiphany, where Christ’s divine nature is revealed, and into the penitential season of Lent, focusing solely on the necessity of Christ Jesus’ suffering and sacrifice. The year finds its culmination in the holiest of weeks (Palm Sunday, Maundy Thursday, and Good Friday) with its highest peak at Easter. The Church celebrates the joy of our Lord’s resurrection and His victory over sin, death and the grave,

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to which we sing our alleluias in praise of Christ. Pentecost marks the Holy Spirit's outpouring upon the Church, as promised by Christ Jesus, empowering her to fulfill her great commission (Matt 28:19-20).

The liturgical year concludes on the Last Sunday of the Church Year or Christ the King Sunday, which draws the focus back to the end times, judgment, and the ultimate triumphant return of Christ Jesus, bringing the cycle to its conclusion before beginning anew with Advent. This sacred cycle ensures that every Christian experiences the drama of redemption annually, reinforcing the doctrine of *sola gratia* (grace alone) through worship and a well-thought-out narrative.

Through a confessional Lutheran lens, the liturgical calendar aims to safeguard scripturally based Christian teachings. Martin Luther preserved the Liturgical Calendar to combat antinomianism (the false teaching that moral laws do not bind Christians) and legalism (the false teaching that following God's moral laws contributes to our salvation), ensuring that worship revolves around Christ Jesus and His saving merits alone. The Augsburg Confession (Art. XV) affirms rites that serve the Gospel, like the liturgical seasons, as adiaphora (matters of Christian freedom) yet beneficial for order and edification. Lutherans use the Liturgical Calendar evangelically, employing seasonal colors (red for the work of the Holy Spirit, purple for repentance, and white for joy, among others), paraments, and hymns to reinforce theology without binding consciences.

The significance of the Liturgical Calendar is profound and yet practical. It connects the Christian to the universal Church, transcending time and culture. In a fragmented world, it offers stability and reminds adults and children that their lives are in Christ Jesus, and each possesses eternal life, now! The liturgical seasons combat consumerism by redirecting our focus to grace and encouraging mercy toward our neighbors. In our homes, the liturgical seasons shape our private lives: Advent wreaths teach children the value of anticipation, Lenten disciplines build resilience, and Easter alleluias instill hope amid trials.

Ultimately, the Liturgical Calendar nurtures a saving faith, as Luther taught, through hearing the full council of God's inerrant and infallible Word, receiving the Sacraments, and living in repentance, gratitude, and trust. It transforms our ordinary days into the extraordinary certainty of eternity with Christ Jesus, assuring every Christian that "God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself" (2 Cor 5:19).†

The Rev. Dr. Cary G. Larson serves The AALC as Presiding Pastor.



Epiphany



Season of Epiphany

By Rev. Joe Marsh

The word "epiphany" comes from the Greek word, *epiphaneia*, meaning "manifestation" or "appearance."

When we look at the church liturgical calendar, Epiphany comes very soon after Christmas. For Lutherans, Epiphany lands on January 6 and continues up until Shrove Tuesday, the day before Ash Wednesday. So the Epiphany season can be quite short or quite long depending on the date of Easter for that year.

The Epiphany season of the church year often gets overshadowed by the "big ones," Christmas, Easter, and Lent. However, in spite of that, Epiphany has a lot of traditions connected with it as well as a strong message about Jesus and His presence in our life.

The Church has long viewed the Magi finding Jesus (thanks to the leading light of a star) as a fulfillment of the prophecy of Isaiah 60:1-3, particularly verse 3:

"Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you. For darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the Lord will arise upon you, and His glory will appear over you. Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn."

*Epiphany has a lot of traditions connected with it as well
as a strong message about Jesus and His presence in our life.*



Epiphany Traditions

Epiphany is often connected with the visit of the wise men to Jesus. Many nativity scenes depict Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, shepherds, farm animals, and three wise men in the stable. However, no one truly knows how many wise men there were. Tradition tells us there were three Magi because of the three gifts offered to Jesus. It is likely that the wise men were not there with the shepherds the night Jesus was born but may have come days, weeks or maybe even months later.

A very old tradition of Epiphany (which was new to me) is “chalking the door.” The purpose of the tradition is to bless one’s home. The practice of chalking the door originated in medieval Europe, and over time spread throughout the Christian world.

Chalking the door involves the pattern of four crosses positioned in between the traditional initials of the three wise men. The letters C, M, and B, which stand for the traditional names of the biblical Magi (Caspary, Melchior and Balthazar).

The first two and last two digits of the current year are written at the beginning and at the end. So chalking the door for 2026 would look like this, 20 † C † M † B † 26. The chalking is often written above the front door to a home and sometimes on the door itself.

The letters “CMB” can also stand for the Latin blessing “*Christus mansionem benedicat*” (May Christ bless this house).

The practice of chalking the door originated in medieval Europe and during a more superstitious time, was intended to protect the Christian home from evil spirits.

Some contend that there is a Biblical precedent for chalking the door, as when the children of Israel marked their doors with lamb’s blood to be saved from the angel of death.

In 20th century Poland, the practice of chalking the door continued among believers as a way of asserting their Christian

identity, despite the Eastern Bloc’s state atheism and anti-religious campaigns.

Another Epiphany tradition is a “Three Kings cake.” This cake is a ring shaped pastry and is served on January 6 to mark the arrival of the Magi to Bethlehem. The cake is typically made with enriched dough, often brioche or puff pastry. The pastry has a trinket baked into it, in earlier times, a coin or a bean. But in modern times it is often a small image of the baby Jesus. This tradition symbolizes the discovery of the Christ child by the Magi.

In some places it is customary to make paper crowns to remember the magi who are often referred to as “kings,” as in the familiar carol: “We Three Kings of Orient Are.”

According to the LCMS website, “The Christian church has continued to follow the example set in the Old Testament of structuring the year around the marvelous acts of salvation that God completed for us in his Son, Christ. We call this structure the Church Year.”¹

So what do we focus on during the Epiphany season?

As most Christians know, the entire Bible, Genesis through Revelations, is about Jesus. In the Old Testament Jesus is hinted at in prophecies, symbolism, and in sightings of heavenly beings. While many Jews thought that the Messiah was only going to come to save the Jewish nation, Scripture reveals over and over that the Messiah would come to save both Jews and Gentiles (non-Jews). The Magi may have been some of the first Gentiles to search for, discover, and worship Jesus.

Lutherans believe that Christ reveals Himself in Baptism, the Lord’s Supper, and in the Bible. While we may only celebrate “Epiphany” once a year, every day is an exciting adventure for those who know and follow Jesus, because in a very real sense every day is an “epiphany,” where Jesus reveals himself over and over again. †

The Rev. Joe Marsh serves Calvary Evangelical Lutheran Church, St. Paul, MN.

¹ The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, “Sundays and Seasons,” <https://www.lcms.org/page.aspx?pid=446>.



An Epiphany for All People

By Rev. Irvin F. Stapf

Epiphany text: Matthew 4:14-15

January 6th is The Festival of Epiphany commemorating the visit of the Magi to the Christ Child. It is the beginning of the liturgical Epiphany season prior to the beginning of Lent. But I would like to look at this word Epiphany and what it means for each of us.

Epiphany is defined as a flash, or insight, or realization of something important and often life changing. The name Epiphany comes from the Greek *epiphaneia*, meaning “appearance” or “manifestation,” and refers to the manifestation of Jesus Christ to the world.

Almighty God loves you enough that He has touched you personally to open the eyes of your heart to His Son, Jesus, our Lord.



The Jewish shepherds on the Bethlehem hillside had an epiphany when the angels announced the birth of the Messiah. The gentile Magi had an epiphany when they gazed into the evening heavens and saw the star foretelling the birth of the King of the Jews. These men from Bethlehem and from an eastern country were vastly different culturally and economically, but the Lord touched their hearts with an amazing and eternal truth. These were only the beginning of the epiphanies concerning this Bethlehem newborn who had been given the name Jesus by the angel Gabriel before His birth. This was a foretaste of very many epiphanies to follow.

Matthew 4:12-25 relates the beginning of Jesus' ministry and the calling the first disciples. After the arrest of John the Baptist, Jesus left Judea for Galilee. Galilee is the northern part of Israel, of what used to be the area of the four northern tribes of Israel, but which had become a mixture of Jews and Gentiles after fall of the northern kingdom. Jesus had settled in Capernaum by the sea of Galilee. Because of its mixed population, the area was known as Galilee of the Gentiles. Matthew 4:14-15 tell us an important truth about Jesus' ministry. Verses 15-16 refer to Isaiah 9:1-2: "The land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali by the way of the sea, on the other side of the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles—The people who were sitting in darkness saw a great Light, and those who were sitting in the land and shadow of death, upon them a Light dawned" (NASB). It was here Jesus began to preach and to call his first disciples.

Jesus was a Jew. He began preaching in many of the town synagogues, but he had intentionally chosen an area with access to many Gentiles. His ministry was to call "the lost sheep of the house of Israel" to repentance (Matt 15:24). But it was clear from the beginning that His Church would be for all nations. As St. Paul would later write to the Galatians, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus." (Gal 3:28 NASB)

Matthew tells us that "Jesus was going about in all of Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom, and healing every disease and every sickness among the people. And the news about Him spread throughout Syria; and they brought to Him all who were ill, those suffering with various diseases and severe pain, demon-possessed, people with epilepsy, and people who were paralyzed; and He healed them. Large crowds followed Him from Galilee and the

Decapolis, and Jerusalem, and Judea, and from beyond the Jordan" (Matt 4:23-25 NASB).

The good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ cannot be contained. Jesus saw His first disciples in their fishing boats by the lake. Peter, James, and John had their epiphanies in the compelling voice of Jesus (Matt 4:18-22). They heard the call. They left everything and followed Him. There would be many more revelations and trials for each of these men, but they knew, as Peter would later say, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have words of eternal life. And we have believed and have come to know that You are the Holy One of God" (John 6:68-69 NASB). In this faith they walked with their Lord and went forth to preach the good news of salvation by God's grace through faith in Jesus, the Christ, God's only begotten Son.

Epiphanies come to us at different times in life as God reaches out His hand of grace to open our eyes to the life of our Lord Jesus. I can remember perhaps my first epiphany. Quite honestly as a young boy of 5 or 7, I really didn't like going to church each week with my parents. We attended our family's German Lutheran church begun by a number of German immigrants in the 1860s. The rather stern pastor, who later confirmed me, represented the awesomeness of God. One thing I remember from that early worship was the absolute reverent care the ladies of the Altar Guild displayed. After the service, with white gloved hands, they would veil the cross and remove the altar ware. I just knew that that area inside the chancel was holy ground. The image of that holiness has stayed with me ever since. It was an epiphany that has been built upon by numerous other experiences.

Each of you, dear brothers and sisters, have your own epiphanies. Almighty God loves you enough that He has touched you personally to open the eyes of your heart to His Son, Jesus our Lord. You have your life, strength, and hope centered in Him. And like Peter, James, and John, we follow Him in the midst of whatever temporal home, family, and livelihood God has provided. We too preach the Gospel of salvation through the life we live, and when we have the opportunity, we use the words He will give.

God bless you as you continue to learn of and serve Him. †

The Rev. Irv Stapf is on the The AALC Pastors Emeriti roster.



Epiphany



The Christian Life

By Rev. Ray Lorthoir

Epiphany text: Matthew 5:1-12.

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (Matt 5:3).

Jesus was no Marxist or Liberation Theologian. He didn’t proclaim the poor automatically saved and the rich automatically condemned. What He noted was that the rich have a hard time entering the Kingdom of Heaven because they tend to be godless and arrogant. That comes out in Jesus’ parable of The Rich Man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31), which places Father Abraham in heaven. Genesis tells us Abraham died a very rich man; so, how did he get into heaven?

Abraham was spiritually poor. For decades Abraham lacked the heir that Yahweh had promised him. Therefore, in his lack, Abraham submitted himself to Yahweh in faith, waiting for God’s gracious promise in Genesis 15:1-6 to be fulfilled. And when Abraham was ordered to sacrifice Isaac (Gen 22), he did so in faith. In his heart Abraham trusted that Yahweh would never renege on His promise of an heir (Heb 11:17-19). Thus Romans 4:16 says Abraham is the father of all who know their poverty of righteousness before our holy, righteous God. He is the father of all who by faith humbly submit to Jesus, our Savior, knowing their great need to be justified by the grace of God. These are the poor in spirit.

“Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted” (Matt 5:4).

Paul summed up the sorrow of the Christian life when he wrote in Romans 7:21-24, “So I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the law of God, in my inner being, but I see in my members another law waging war against the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?”

All those who yearn for deliverance from the power of the sinful nature mourn over their hypocrisy. Believers know they are in a wretched situation. However, Yahweh promises comfort with pure righteousness in the resurrection. And even now we have that comfort. For, Paul answers his own despairing question with certain faith in Romans 7:25: “Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!”

“Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth” (Matt 5:5).

What exactly is meekness? We’re told in Numbers 12:3, “Now the man Moses was very meek, more than all people who were on the face of the earth.” Moses was no pushover. Neither was Jesus. So what made them meek? They were disciplined before the Lord. Like soldiers disciplined in basic training to instantly obey an officer’s command, the great ones of Scripture humbled themselves under the mighty hand of God so that they could do His righteous will.

The new heavens and the new earth of the resurrected righteous life are described in chapter 21 of Revelation. However, in the

same chapter we are informed that those in rebellion against Yahweh absolutely have no part in righteous eternal life. They didn't want Yahweh and His righteousness in this life. Therefore, Yahweh will oblige their desire in the life to come. They will never have to deal with Yahweh again. As Jesus said in Matthew 25:41, they will follow Satan and all his fellow rebels right into the lake of fire. On the other hand, the disciplined meek will inherit Yahweh's new earth because they hungered and thirsted for Yahweh's righteousness.

“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied” (Matt 5:6).

The pure goodness of God is something all humans were meant to have. We were created in His image. But the original sin of our first parents has denied this to us.

However, Adam and Eve's sin didn't stop Yahweh. On the day they sinned, He promised them a Messiah Who would crush the head of the serpent (Gen 3:15).

Adam and Eve sinned by grasping equality with God. They became their own gods, defining good and evil for themselves and acting upon their definitions. Because of original sin we are forced to do the same. However, playing God is the very thing that leads to the lake of fire. Therefore, as promised, Yahweh, the Son, came as a real human to rectify the situation. Philippians 2:5-11 says Jesus won a spectacular victory for the human race by refusing all Satan's temptations to grasp at equality with God. For our sake, Jesus remained disciplined in power under Yahweh, even to death on a cross.

The result for us is the righteousness of God. 2 Corinthians 5:21 tells us, “For our sake He [God] made Him [Jesus] to be sin Who knew no sin, so that in Him [Jesus] we might become the righteousness of God.” Therefore, all who hunger and thirst to be restored to the image of God will be satisfied. We can only have partial restoration in this life. But pure righteousness is fully guaranteed in the age to come to all who die baptized and believing in Christ. We shall be satisfied. And so will Yahweh.

“Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy” (Matt 5:6).

We are unequivocally told in Romans 9:16, “It [Salvation] does not, therefore, depend on human desire or effort, but on God's mercy” (NIV). Mercy is when you have the power to do harm, but you don't. Yahweh not only has the power but the right to judge all who sinfully rebel against Him. As we saw above, all who follow Satan will follow him right into the lake of fire. However, John 3:16 says, “For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life.” This is pure mercy.

So, if our deliverance from eternal punishment depends entirely on Christ's mercy toward us, why should we withhold mercy from our fellow believers and even our enemies? For, if Jesus' saying is so, then the opposite is also true. The merciless will be shown no mercy.

“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.” (Matt 5:8).

Purity of heart comes from God alone — through His mercy to those who are hungry, poor, meek, and mournful over their present condition. Purity of heart is only created when our sins are forgiven and covered over by the righteousness of Christ. Lord Holy Spirit is the only source of purity we can have in this life. So, those who long for purity of heart will rejoice to see Jesus when He comes.

“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God” (Matt 5:8).

A president may be successful at making peace among nations. There are some who make peace in families and even churches.

However, there is a great war that has been ongoing from the beginning. It is the struggle between Yahweh and His creatures over who will be God. Jesus made peace from Yahweh's side through the cross. And we can have that peace. For, it says in Romans 5:1, “Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.”

However, many are still at war with Yahweh. They ridicule Him, ignore Him, blame Him. Mostly they defy Him — doing what seems right in their own eyes. In our culture, rich and poor alike are at war with Yahweh. Nevertheless, Law and Gospel still go forth from God's people, proclaiming peace. Those who win souls to God's peace are sons of God. By grace through faith, those who meekly end their war with God also become sons of God.

“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you” (Matt 5:10-12).

Those at war with Yahweh are inevitably at war with His people. Therefore, if we are attacked for proclaiming peace with Yahweh, we can't take it personally. As Jesus said in Luke 10:16, “. . . the one who rejects you rejects me. . . .” And, even if we should be persecuted to death for the sake of proclaiming peace with God, we just saw Jesus promise great reward in the main event of life.

Those who believe Jesus mourn over their poverty of righteousness. Hungering and thirsting after righteousness, Lord Holy Spirit grants them meekness before the Lord in strength and discipline. Those who believe Jesus long for righteous purity of heart. They know that it is only through the mercy of Jesus' cross that they will receive it. Those who believe Jesus long to bring others to peace with Him. They understand the risk and are willing to endure rejection for the sake of Jesus. †

The Rev. Ray Lorthioir serves Trinity Lutheran Church, West Hempstead, NY.



Congregation Feature



Submitted photo

Hope Lutheran Church

By Karla Rebling

Hope Lutheran Church, Brighton, IA, is nestled in the beautiful, rural countryside of southeast Iowa. Surrounding the 15-acre property are hills and valleys of cropland and pastures, highlighting the splendor of God's hand, seen in the expanse of magnificent sunrises and sunsets!

Established in December 1845 (a year before Iowa was admitted to the Union), Hope is celebrating its 180th Anniversary, as the oldest, active, Lutheran congregation west of the Mississippi! First services were spoken in German in a log style structure, then replaced with a frame building in 1862, including the statue of Jesus Christ and the lectern, which are still in use today. A steeple and bell were added later. As the congregation grew, it was necessary to rebuild in 1913. A cornerstone was laid one Sunday morning with the words imprinted: Evangelical Lutheran Hope Church A.D. 1913. In 1962, a new addition was added. The cemetery, overlooking the valley below, is located east of the church. It is a peaceful countryside that lets you bask in the presence of the Almighty God! Hope joined The AALC on April 26, 1992.

Our congregation ranges from the older generation to the very young. On a typical Sunday, there is a hub of activity, with Sunday School/Bible Study classes for all ages. Over half the congregation participates in Christian education classes, bringing us even closer together as the body of Christ. Hope has a blended service, in which we carry on elements of the past to preserve our traditional roots and enough of the new to create an environment that feels less formal, warm, and welcoming. As a congregation that loves to sing praises to God, we have either piano or the Worship Band each Sunday. Rev. Ryan Dexter, who has faithfully served over 10 years, is a shepherd in every sense of the word. He faithfully proclaims God's Word, guides, encourages, supports, and tirelessly cares for his flock. We are blessed to have him serve our congregation!

Following worship, friends and family can be seen gathering to visit in the church, outside, or walking someone to their car. Hope has a strong sense of community, where people can feel at ease and supported. We are family!

Hope offers a wide variety of groups that provide a dynamic, energetic range of activities throughout the year. Luther League is led by a team of leaders whose endless energy provides the youth fun activities, as well as implanting God's word through Bible studies. WOL main activities include: Samaritan's Purse—Operation Christmas Child, sewing of comforters, and the spring salad supper. Some outreach missions include: Fifth Sunday Fellowship, Celebrate Recovery, HACAP Food Distribution, Blood Drive, and Angel Tree. Fifth Sunday Fellowship includes some of our favorite annual events: Trunk or Treat, Hot Dogs and Cool Slides (over 100 ft. water slide!), Soup Cookoff, Antique Tractor Club, and the Kickball Tournament between kids and adults.

Christmas Eve is a special service each year. We traditionally have our Sunday School Christmas Program and Holy Communion Candlelight Service. Closing with "Silent Night" in a darkened church with candlelight filling the sanctuary, brings home the message of that most sacred Holy Night.

God is seen at work through the hands and hearts of the people. Through hardships, joys, and small acts of kindness, the people of Hope Lutheran Church join together to love, support, and encourage one another, as extensions of the Body of Christ.

A former pastor once summarized who we are: "...people redeemed by Jesus Christ – looking for ways to live this out in service to others and in sharing freely the joy that knowing the Savior brings." †

Karla Rebling is a member of Hope Lutheran Church, Brighton, IA.

Women of L.I.F.E Activities in AALC Eastern Region



Front Row (L to R): Bonnie Ohlrich, Donna Drewes, Marsha Drewes, Jeanette Warncke, Deb Bartelheim, Linda Sonnenberg; Back Row (L to R): Susanne Tilse, Sherry Haas, Micky Baker, Doretta Daman, Ruthann Cordes, Marie Dapelo, Laurie O'Brien. Submitted photo



Above: The photograph of the six Women of L.I.F.E. was captured within our church sanctuary. From left to right, bottom row: Becky Pethtel, Kim Stephan, Judy Trissell, and Terri Chmiel. Top row left to right: Ann Sloan and Barbara Wheeler **Below:** Women of L.I.F.E. from Our Savior Lutheran Church in Piqua, OH, gather together to make Health Care Kits for Lutheran World Relief. Submitted photos.

St. Paul's Lutheran Church, Napoleon, OH

The Women of L.I.F.E. at St. Paul's Lutheran Church, Napoleon Twp, Napoleon, OH, are very blessed to have one of our members, Karen Gerken, leading us in our monthly Bible Studies. She has done so for quite a few years and for that we are very thankful. We recently finished the "Women of The Promise" study written by Rev. Rich Eddy. In September, we were scheduled to begin a new study: "The Armor of God: Suiting Up & Standing Firm," written by Laurie O'Brien. Unfortunately, Karen was not going to be available that night to lead our study.

It turned out our Bible Study leader that evening was none other than Laurie O'Brien herself, who just happened to be in Northwest Ohio, visiting the Napoleon Dapelos – The Rev. Dan Dapelo and his family, as well as Laurie's sister-in-law, Marie Dapelo (Dan's mother). We felt very blessed to begin this new study with the author herself leading us. Thank you, Laurie, for your guidance and all your additional insight. It was a delightful evening! Of course, we had to get a group picture. †

Our Savior Lutheran Church, Piqua, OH

Each year, the Women of L.I.F.E. of Our Savior Lutheran Church in Piqua, OH, gather together to make health care kits for Lutheran World Relief. This year, 32 kits were shipped to a Lutheran Church in Tennessee. Each kit contains a bath towel, comb, soap, nail clippers, and toothbrush. The kits are distributed to help someone in need during a disaster. Additionally, we help stock our local community food pantry twice a year.

We gather monthly for a Bible study. This year, we are studying "Ruth: A Love Story to Us from God's Heart," written by Cathy Twito. In 2026, our lessons will be based on "Behold the Man: Finding Christ in the Old Testament," by Rev. Abraham and Shannon McNally.

Our organization is comprised of a strong group of women committed to supporting one another and enhancing our community. †



ALTS Continues Accreditation Process

By Rev. Dr. Chris Caughey

On November 14, 2025, the American Lutheran Theological Seminary (ALTS) submitted our annual report to our accrediting agency: the Association for Biblical Higher Education (ABHE). We are required to write this report every year—and we must include supporting evidence. That evidence must be more than an e-mail, or minutes from one committee meeting. The ABHE is looking for patterns of evidence that demonstrate that ALTS is making substantial progress toward meeting the nine standards of accreditation. And we at ALTS have definitely made substantial progress this year!

Since accreditation is not simply a long application process, but a program of self-improvement teaching us how to become the best confessional Lutheran seminary we can possibly be, we have to think about the five W's (and one H): Who, What, When, Where, Why, and How. We have to keep big, philosophical questions in mind, like: Why do we do what we do? But when we begin to answer that question, it immediately becomes clear that there are lots of details involved in how we do what we do. For many years, ALTS was such a small institution with so few students, that it was relatively easy for a handful of staff people to handle all of the operations. If anyone had questions, the seminary president or Bonnie Ohlrich had the answers.

But now that we have grown from tens of students to close to one hundred students—and now that we have added a Certificate of Lutheran Theology program and a Doctor of Ministry program (along with adding qualified faculty to teach all of the courses we offer)—things have changed. Rev. President Leins and Bonnie may still be able to answer all of the questions, but it sure would help them and everyone else if we had clear policies and procedures written down and published where stakeholders can find them.

So earlier in 2025, Rev. Ben Baker began to help ALTS migrate all of our data and records onto a new Learning Management System called Populi. Not only is Populi an information hub, but students can easily see which courses their degree program requires, which courses they have already taken, which courses they still need, and when those needed courses will be offered. We have also assigned faculty advisors for all of our Master of Divinity students this year. In 2026, we will assign advisors for the other degree programs as well.

Rev. Matthew Fenn has been an invaluable contributor to the progress we have made in 2025. He drafted policies on Conflict of

Interest for Members of Commission on Higher Education (CHE), the Process for Recruitment, Orientation, and Development of CHE Members, Faculty Authority in Academic Governance, the Process for Ongoing Assessment of the Effectiveness of the CHE and its Members, the Oversight and Evaluation of the Seminary President, Faculty Qualifications, and more. In conjunction with our Accreditation Coordinator, Rev. Dr. Chris Caughey, and our Accreditation Consultant, Dr. Kathryn Helleman, Rev. Fenn also drafted an institutional assessment plan whereby we will use the ABHE standards to evaluate the effectiveness of each of our degree programs—one program per year. Thankfully, the CHE approved all of these things, and we began assessing our Master of Divinity degree program at the September faculty meeting. We need to show the ABHE that we have engaged in multiple cycles of such assessment, and that we have made necessary adjustments along the way.

The ABHE considers accreditation to be an eight-year process. The first four years of that process are the Applicant phase; the second four years are the Candidate phase, followed by full accreditation. We have just completed the second year of the Applicant phase. But we took a bold step on November 14, 2025, by adding an official request to accelerate our process. Both our ABHE representative and our Accreditation Consultant thought that we were in a good position to make such a request. So, we would like to ask you to pray with us that the ABHE would grant our request to accelerate our Applicant phase of the process. We will find out in February 2026 about the ABHE's decision.

In the meantime, we will continue to form confessional Lutherans for many different vocations, but especially to form pastors who specialize in the care and cure of souls.✚

The Rev. Dr. Chris Caughey is an instructor at ALTS and serves the congregation of St. Paul Ev. Lutheran Church, Augusta, KY.

The End of Christianity as We Know It

By John Austin

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ! Our Lord has continually blessed our seminary with new students across our degree programs and the world. There are many new exciting things going on at American Lutheran Theological Seminary (ALTS). In this article, we want to share with you one update regarding an initiative to expand our seminary's presence and share our view on seminary education.

In January 2026, we are launching a podcast titled "The End of Christianity as We Know It" featuring Rev. Dr. Curtis Leins (Seminary President), Rev. Dr. Chris Caughey (Professor of Biblical Studies), and myself, John Austin (National Engagement and Communications Advisor for ALTS). In this podcast we seek to uncover the changing landscape of western Christianity and higher education. Moreover, you will hear about how ALTS uniquely aims to serve Christendom through its preeminent degree programs with unmatched accessibility and, most importantly, the heart of Christ.

Demographic trends have seen smaller congregations becoming the new normal and traditional residential seminary programs are increasingly unsustainable and not meeting the needs of the current moment. The culture is also becoming more antagonistic towards Christianity. We very well may be headed into an era that is more similar to the early church.

This is indeed the end of Christianity as we know it, but as history shows, the church has historically thrived in trying times. So, we must not despair, but look to God in prayer, asking Him to send us where He wills.

ALTS is here and uniquely prepared for this cultural shift. The number of classes offered has expanded to 59 courses between our four degree programs. Our faculty has expanded to 13 professors. Moreover, in the last 11 years, we have served 185 students and currently have 81 active students. Your seminary is quite healthy, but our Lord is calling us to do more. This podcast is one initiative to let potential students across the world know we are here to serve and care for them. It is also a place for us to engage in the dialogue regarding the formation of pastors and church workers and put forth our view on these matters.

We rejoice in all the Lord has done through our seminary over the last decade. In addition, though, we must pray that He would do even more in the next ten years. This podcast is the beginning of many initiatives to do this. We would encourage you to please check out our podcast on your favorite platform (Spotify, Apple Podcasts, YouTube, etc.).

We need more pastors, church workers, and academically trained laity to continue building up the church in these ever-changing times. So, if you or someone you know is interested, please visit our website (alts.edu) and reach out. We are here to walk with you.

We are praying for you all; please pray for us. May God's blessings be upon you all. †

John Austin is a Field Worker at First English Lutheran Church, Gibsonburg, OH; National Engagement and Communications Advisor for ALTS and The AALC; and an M. Div. Candidate at American Lutheran Theological Seminary.

January 2026
PRAYER BOOKMARK

1. Eastern Region TAALC
2. First English Lutheran Church, Gibsonburg, OH
3. Regional Pastors
4. Rev. Steve Klawonn, Assistant Presiding Pastor
5. Our Savior Lutheran Church, Piqua, OH
6. To meditate on the revelation of Jesus Christ to the Gentiles
7. Rev. Dan Dapelo
8. Emeritus Pastor Fred Balke
9. Dan Kruger, Treasurer of The AALC
10. Peace Lutheran Church, Defiance, OH
11. Emeritus Pastor Gary Benson
12. Rev. Ray Lorthioir
13. To meditate on the Manifestation of Christ
14. Regional Chairmen
15. Pr. Charles Sandison
16. Emeritus Pastor Paul Hansen
17. St. Paul's Lutheran Church, Napoleon, OH
18. Rev. Dean Stoner
19. Christ Lutheran Church, Germantown, MD
20. Emeritus Pastor Irvin Stapf
21. Bethel Lutheran Church, Rowland, PA
22. American Lutheran Theological Seminary
23. Rev. Thomas Jahr
24. To meditate on Magi's visit to Jesus
25. Rev. Dr. Samuel Zumwalt
26. Hope Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA
27. To celebrate Jesus' Baptism
28. Rev. Anthony Voltattorni
29. Pastor's Wives
30. St. Timothy Lutheran Church, Charleston, WV
31. To meditate on Jesus' Transfiguration



February 2026

PRAYER BOOKMARK

1. Faith Lutheran Church, Watseka, IL
2. Rev. John Hallock
3. Rev. Nigel Brown
4. That this is a season of Light in Jesus
5. St. Paul Lutheran Church, Augusta, KY
6. Rev. Michael Hartley
7. Agency for Professional Chaplains
8. Rev. Richard Sunderlage
9. Rev. Neil Cadle
10. Christus Victor Ev. Lutheran Church, Fayetteville, NC
11. Rev. Robert Wallace
12. That this is a season of Truth in Jesus
13. Christ The King Lutheran Church, Chesterfield, MI
14. Association Council
15. That Jesus will be continually revealed to all
16. Trinity Lutheran Church, West Hempstead, NY
17. Churches without Pastors
18. Rev. Dr. Chris Caughey
19. Good Shepherd Lutheran Church, Franklin, NC
20. Rev. Joseph Christina
21. To meditate on Jesus' first miracle at Cana
22. Zion Evangelical Lutheran Church, Marshall, MI
23. Rev. William Moberly
24. The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod
25. Radio/Podcast Ministries
26. St Matthew's Evangelical Luth. Church, Wilmington, NC
27. Lutherans For Life
28. That God would raise up Church Workers

Pastors' Conference Held



The AALC Annual Pastors' Conference was held October 20-23, 2025, at Calvary Lutheran Church, St. Paul, MN, with the theme: "The Lutheran Pastor's Understanding of Good Works," based on Titus 2:1, 7-8. Guest speaker was Rev. Dr. Harold L. Senkbeil, who has served as pastor, professor, author, and Executive Director Emeritus of DOXOLOGY. Additional presentations and reports were given, including Seminary President Rev. Dr. Curtis Leins, Rev. Dr. Mark Mattes, Conference Chaplain Rev. Tylan Dalrymple, Rev. Phillip Hofina, and AALC Presiding Pastor Rev. Dr. Cary Larson. Clergy also had the opportunity for times of fellowship, free time, and evening worship services. Submitted photos.

NORTH PLAINS REGIONAL CONFERENCE

By Rev. Kevin Beard

It is my joy to share with you the highlights of the North Plains Regional Conference, which was held October 3-4, 2025. This gathering of pastors and lay leaders was a time of fellowship, worship, and encouragement for the work of Christ's church.

In attendance were Rev. Dr. Cary Larson, Rev. David Huskamp of Shepherd of the Valley Lutheran in Sidney, MT, Rev. Dean Johansen of American Lutheran in Mandan, ND, Rev. Greg Stenzel of Our Redeemers Lutheran in Williston, ND, and Rev. Kevin Beard of Light of Christ Lutheran, also in Williston. We were joined by members from our congregations, as well as representatives from Trinity Lutheran Church in Alexander, ND.

The conference began Friday evening with a shared meal and a worship service that set our hearts and minds on Christ's work. On Saturday morning, after breakfast, Pr. Johansen led us in a devotion centered on God's Word. The day included a presentation by Pr. Huskamp, who shared his experiences from a recent mission trip to Peru. We also heard from Jeanie Leland of Sidney, who testified to the impact of mission trips she has taken in Costa Rica, Nepal, and Peru. Through her witness, we were reminded that people of all ages can bring hope and help to others, whether through national or international mission work.

The business portion of the conference was marked by prayerful decision-making. We give thanks to God for those elected to serve:

- Regional Treasurer: Janice Deesten
- National Board of Trustees: Rev. Dean Johansen and Laura Weishoff
- Clergy Representative for the Association Council: Rev. Greg Stenzel
- Commission on World Missions: Rev. Kevin Beard
- Youth Commission: Rev. David Huskamp

In addition, Rev. Dr. Larson delivered a thoughtful and encouraging presentation on the current state of The American Association of Lutheran Churches, as well as the direction in which we are heading together in Christ.

The conference concluded with a shared dinner and warm fellowship, as we departed strengthened in faith and renewed in our commitment to proclaim Christ and serve His mission.

We thank God for His presence among us, for the faithful service of His people, and for the work that continues in the North Plains Region and beyond. May the Lord bless and keep us as we go forth in His name. †

The Rev. Kevin Beard serves Light of Christ Lutheran Church in Williston, ND.



The North Plains Region of The AALC held its biennial regional conference October 3-4, 2025, at Light of Christ Lutheran Church, Williston, ND. The conference included business sessions, presentations, evening service, food, and fellowship. Submitted photos.

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The
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UPCOMING EDITIONS...

Themes for 2026: Six Church Seasons and High Feast Days

Please be in prayer for these upcoming editions:

Mar/Apr: Lent (*deadline Jan. 1*)

May/June: Easter (*deadline March 1*)

Jul/Aug: Pentecost (*deadline May 1*)

Sept/Oct: High Feast Days in the Church (*deadline July 1*)

Nov/Dec: Advent & Christmas (*deadline Sept. 1*)

Church News:

The Evangel welcomes submissions of what's happening in your congregation. To submit content, **email the editor** Gretchen Baker: theevangel@taalc.org

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