

The

EVANGEL

Congregational Life & Holy Scripture Edition





From the Editor

The cookbook promised this banana bread recipe never failed. But as I pulled the loaf out of the oven and tested it for “done-ness,” the knife came out smudged with raw dough. “Grandma Butler’s ‘No Fail’ Banana Bread” had flopped.

The internet promised this was the perfect plan for keeping the house clean and my life organized. I tacked the printed sheet on the fridge, while my husband silently shook his head, which may tell you how many times I have tried this and failed...

Yes, these are trivial examples. But the reality that we humans can fail in so many ways is what makes it concerning when someone bases their spiritual life on their thoughts, experiences, or even worse, a dream?

When it comes to what is most important: our salvation and daily life as a Christian, God gives us something much more certain than ourselves. He bases our salvation on His own actions, given to us through His Word and Sacraments.

What a relief. In times of doubt, I can look to the absolute truth of Scripture: this is what God has done for me. How do I know it is for me personally? We can answer: “The waters of baptism were sprinkled on *my* head. The bread and wine of the Lord’s Supper are in *my* mouth. God has promised to be present there.”

One of the ways God cares for us and nurtures our faith is through our local church. This month’s edition is focused on Congregational Life and Holy Scripture. Whether we are selecting a Bible Study, understanding the pastor’s role, planning a funeral, bringing a child to church, or studying the words to a song, we can see these aspects are rooted in the truths of Scripture and rest on God’s faithfulness.

In closing, consider these quotes about the Church:

“It is easily forgotten that the fellowship of Christian brethren is a gift of grace, a gift of the Kingdom of God... It is grace, nothing but grace, that we are allowed to live in community with Christian brethren.”¹

“The Holy Spirit causes our sanctification by the following: the communion of saints or the Christian Church, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. That means He leads us first into His holy congregation and places us in the bosom of the Church. Through the Church He preaches to us and brings us to Christ.”²

In HIS peace,

Gretchen Baker

Gretchen Baker
The Editor

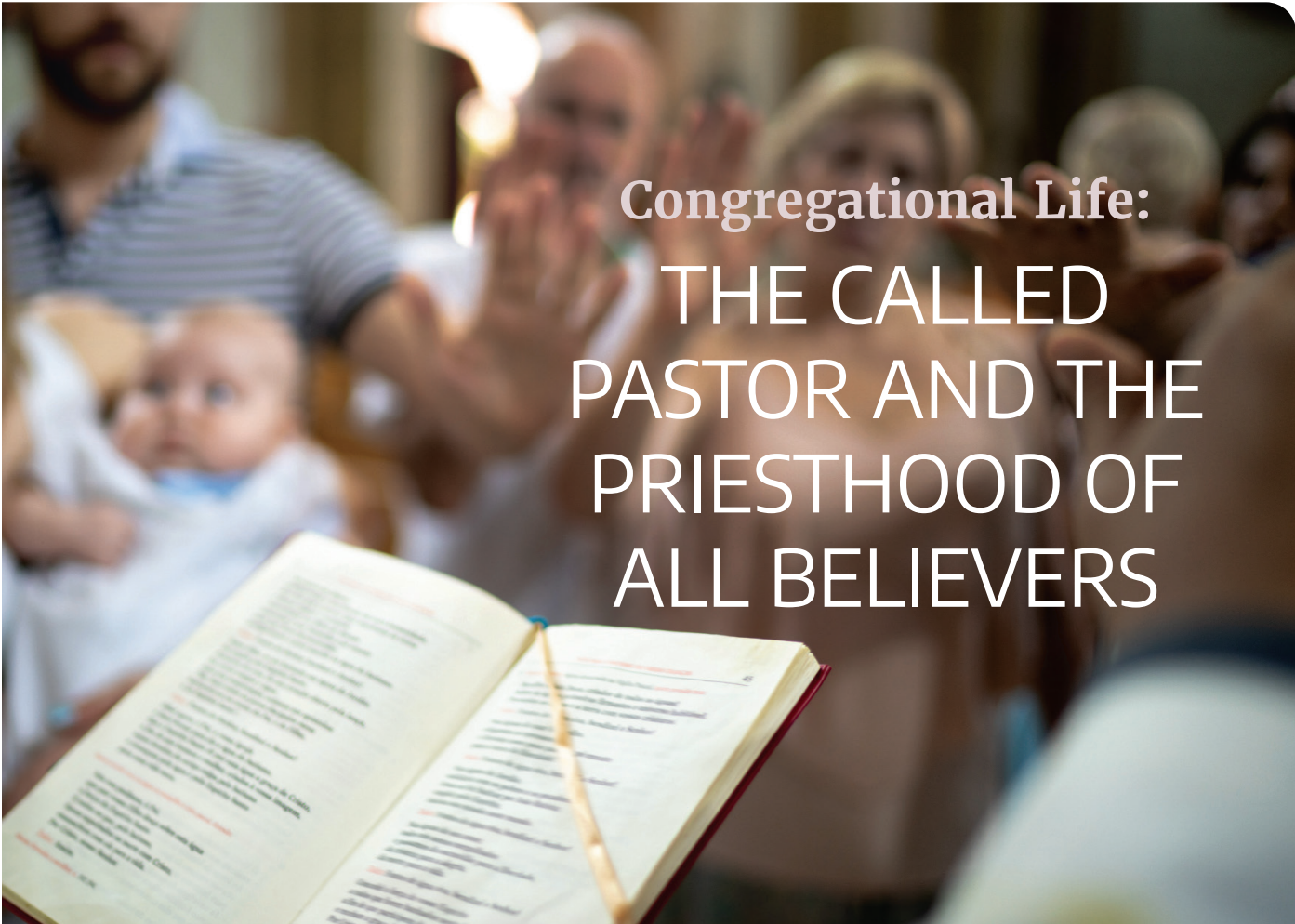
¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together: The Classic Exploration of Christian Community* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, Inc., 1954), 20.

² Ed. Paul Timothy McCain, *Concordia: The Lutheran Confessions: A Reader’s Edition of the Book of Concord* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2005–2006), 403.

- 2 From the Editor
- 3 Presiding Pastor
- 6 Children: To Such as These
- 7 Children are Welcome
- 8 A Christian Funeral
- 9 The Good Book in the Pew
- 10 Selecting a Bible Study
- 11 ALTS: Meet the Students
- 12-13 Hymn Study
- 13-14 Prayer Bookmark
- 15 Amy’s Angels Childcare

Unless indicated otherwise, all Scripture quotations are from the Holy Bible, English Standard Version®, copyright ©2007 by Crossway Bibles, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Editor: Gretchen Baker
Layout & Design: Karen Young



Congregational Life: THE CALLED PASTOR AND THE PRIESTHOOD OF ALL BELIEVERS

By Rev. Dr. Cary G. Larson

“...you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ” (1 Pet 2:5).

“In order that we may obtain this faith, the Ministry of Teaching the Gospel and administering the Sacraments was instituted. For through the Word and Sacraments, as through instruments, the Holy Ghost is given, who works faith; where and when it pleases God, in them that hear the Gospel, to wit, that God, not for our own merits, but for Christ’s sake, justifies those who believe that they are received into grace for Christ’s sake.” *The Augsburg Confession, Art. V.*

When God, the Holy Spirit, calls, gathers, enlightens, and keeps people in the true faith, He intends to have them gather around Word and Sacrament to be the Church in every sense of its biblical definition. He alone qualifies those He has called for His good and perfect purpose. By the Word and water, all of God’s people are shareholders in the purpose and mission of Christ Jesus’ holy Bride. Due to their baptism, no one is a benchwarmer or an axillary member of the priesthood. Said in another way, to be a Christian is to have a share in the work of the Church, which is not optional. It is an inseparable part of your vocation and life as a Christian.

The New Testament is laden with specific references (2 Cor 3:2-3; 1 Pet 2:5; 4:10, Rev 1:5-6) to what is called the “priesthood of all believers,” therefore it cannot be said that this priesthood is something “made up” by the church or church leadership. It is a divine mandate. Christ Jesus said His followers would do more extraordinary things after His ascension (John 14:12).

In my office, I have a paperweight that quotes the sainted Dr. Martin Luther, “It is the duty of every Christian to be Christ to his neighbor.” In all aspects of life, to be a priest of Jesus Christ, aka a Christian, is to constantly point to the grace and mercy of God that we all know in Christ Jesus by faith.

Drawing upon earlier Lutheran statements of faith, reformer Phillip Melancthon composed the Augsburg Confession to present the Lutheran Confessions to Emperor Charles V at the Diet of Augsburg in 1530. Melancthon immediately follows the Article of Justification (Article IV) with the lifting of the Office of the Ministry in Article V. The Lutheran Confessions emphatically state that it was to ensure the proper teaching of the Gospel and the faithful administration of Christ’s holy sacraments that the Office of Word and Sacrament was created, to ensure people would obtain the true faith (AC IV 1-2).¹

Pastor and Priesthood continued...

However, the residual and lasting effect of early and present American revivalism, when coupled with American pietism, contemporary social justice, clergy's flagrant abuses and incompetence, and aggravated by today's expressive individualism (be true to your heart), has resulted in discounting the perceived necessity of the Office of Word and Sacrament, better known as the Office of the Pastor. For many, pastors are seen as commentators on life but are irrelevant since they are freed from the burdens of real work and struggles.²

Regrettably, there are even those who claim to speak for the Lutheran Church as ecclesiastical authorities who have instead added doctrinal uncertainty to the faith. By placating to the *zeitgeist*, the spirit of the age, they openly reject biblical truths as clearly detailed in the confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church. These "authoritative" voices publicly dismiss doctrines that have always been central to Christian theology, such as the inerrancy and infallibility of Holy Scripture³, the substitutionary atonement of Jesus Christ⁴, the existence of hell and eternal death⁵, and the doctrine that salvation is through no other than Jesus Christ⁶, to name just a few. Paul's warning to Timothy that people will not put up with sound doctrine but find that which is pleasing to the ear was exceptionally prophetic, not only in their time but today as well (2 Tim 4:3-4).

Church history has proven that sustainable congregational life cannot be accomplished through revival, pietism, legalism, or a "listen to your heart" attitude. These ongoing failures are exacerbated by repeatedly peddling a superficial theology that a Christian must be a "self-feeder" regarding faith or through erroneous teachings, such as gospel reductionism.⁷ A competent under-shepherd of Christ Jesus must lead the priesthood of all believers that have called him; such leadership is only possible when the called pastor commands a thorough understanding of the proper distinction between Law and Gospel. The called pastor is obligated to declare the Law's sharpness, but he must never fail to follow closely with the proclamation of the true Gospel of Christ Jesus. He is to proclaim liberty to the captives via the Office of the Keys and must remain a faithful steward of the mysteries of the means of grace.

A compelling study examined the traits of growing mainline Protestant churches in southern Ontario. This study found that churches whose pastors were theologically conservative and exhibited consistent Bible reading and prayer became the leading factor for the regrettably rare growing mainline Protestant congregations. The conclusion is that faithful pastors "pull" the congregation toward the direction of their own conservative theology.⁸ In other words, the pastor is the most significant influence upon the theological convictions of the average church-attending Christian. Consequently,



Church history has proven that sustainable congregational life cannot be accomplished through revival, pietism, legalism, or a "listen to your heart" attitude.

pastors must lead, teach, proclaim, feed, and even sacrifice for Christ Jesus' beautiful lambs, but he is also called to equip the saints for the good work that God has for each member of the priesthood.

How do we function in this congregational life as called pastors and priests? Are we to conflict with each other over who has authority or power? Are the oxen unequally yoked? The plan is straightforward according to the inerrant Scriptures and the trustworthy Lutheran Confessions. The church must be built and sustainable through a congregational life of active laity led by serving and faithful pastors. A ministry of concord that ministers and equips the priesthood so that the priests can go

into their God-given vocations to evangelize the world for Christ Jesus' sake.

Therefore, let it be noted that this congregational life as priests and called pastors is as follows:

1. Every baptized Christian has been baptized into the death and resurrection of Christ Jesus and is therefore a member of the royal priesthood of God.
2. The Holy Spirit will work through the priesthood and the Office of Word and Sacrament in the calling, gathering, sanctifying, enlightening, and keeping people in the true faith.
3. The primary call of the pastor is to feed, tend, and equip the priesthood through Word and Sacrament and pastoral care.
4. As we know through the Reformation and especially as we know it in The AALC, called pastors faithful to the Word of God, moved by the Holy Spirit, working hand-in-hand with priesthood of all believers accomplish amazing things as God would ordain it. †

In the holy name of Christ Jesus. Amen.

The Rev. Dr. Cary Larson is the Presiding Pastor of The AALC.

1 Theodore G. Tappert, ed., *The Book of Concord - The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1995), 31.

2 Leon J. Podles, *The Church Impotent* (Dallas: Spencer Publishing Co., 1999), 5.

3 John Walsh, "Nadia Bolz-Weber Does Ministry Differently," *Out in Jersey*, October 21, 2018, accessed March 1, 2023, <http://www.outinjersey.net/nadia-bolz-weber-does-ministry-differently>.

4 David Lose, "Is God Angry at You? A Good Friday Reflection," *Huffpost*, April 4, 2012, accessed March 1, 2023, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/david-lose/is-god-pissed-off-good-friday-reflection_b_1386902.html.

5 Robert Herguth, "Top Lutheran Bishop: If hell exist, 'I Think It's Empty'," *Chicago Sun Times*, March 7, 2018, accessed March 1, 2023, <http://www.chicago.suntimes.com/2018/3/7/18372814/top-lutheran-bishop-if-hell-exists-i-think-it-s-empty>.

6 Chelse Vicari, "ELCA Goes Universalism," *Juicy Ecumenism*, August 12, 2019, accessed March 1, 2023, <http://www.juicyecumenism.com/2019/08/12/elca-goes-universalist/>.

7 Originally called "Law- Gospel reductionism" by Dr. John Warwick Montgomery in 1966 and is better known today as "Gospel reductionism." Gospel reductionists subscribe to the idea that the Gospel rather than Scripture is the standard for doctrine and practice in the church. Cf. John W. Montgomery, *Crisis in Lutheran Theology*, Vol. 1 (Irvine: New Reformation Press, 2017), 81-123.

8 David Millard Haskell, Kevin N. Flatt and Stephanie Burgoyne, "Theology Matters: Comparing the Traits of Growing and Declining Mainline Protestant Church Attendees and Clergy," *Review of Religious Research* (Vol. 58, No. 4, December 2016), 536.



The plan is straightforward according to the inerrant Scriptures and the trustworthy Lutheran Confessions. The church must be built and sustainable through a congregational life of active laity led by serving and faithful pastors.





Congregational Life: TO SUCH AS THESE

By Rev. Joe Christina

One of the greatest sounds on earth is the sound of little ones in church. I am aware of certain megachurches in our neck of the North Carolina woods that excuse children from the sermon portion of worship or separates the children from the adults for the entirety of the service. As a Lutheran, I find this perplexing as our Lord once remarked, “Let the little children come to me and do not hinder them for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these” (Mark 10:14).

As a confessional church body, we do not exclude our babies from the Sacrament of Holy Baptism. So why would we exclude them from corporate worship? I have a personal rule of thumb for my Sunday mornings: Deliver the children’s message to the children and to the adults and deliver the sermon to the adults and to the children. I consider preaching as if we are all gathered around a huge kitchen table as a church family. And our little ones are as much a part of the target audience as our most mature members.

When I first came to Christus Victor, it was the summertime. And during the summers, the children’s message (right after the Epistle reading) consisted of a bag that a child would bring to me with a mystery item in it that I would try to tie into the sermon message of the day. In a sense, it was sort of a game of “stump the pastor.” By God’s grace, they haven’t stumped me yet. (Yet.) In fact, when my first summer was ended, I continued this same format as it was what I had become used to, and the kids love when it’s their turn to take the bag home for the week.

My preaching style is somewhat interactive, as I will respond to enthusiastic nods of agreement or acknowledge when someone

answers a rhetorical question. The little ones are just as much a part of this as well. In fact, it is not uncommon for one of my lambs to proudly blurt out a correct answer, and I will offer them my pulpit Bible and respond, “Here, kid. You wanna do this?” (Strangely, no kid has taken me up on this offer yet.)

Once in a while children will, in fact, take my job away from me. For example, at the conclusion of worship I use the common dismissal of “Go in peace and serve the Lord” to which the congregation responds “Thanks be to God!” Well, my lambs have sort of hijacked my part as I simply say “Go in peace,” and they cut me off with “AND SERVE THE LORD.” This is perfectly ok to me. And even when little ones are being rambunctious in church or crying or simply being noisy, they are still a part of our worship family, and it is nothing short of a blessing to have them at the table.

Very seldom in Scripture do we read about our Savior becoming genuinely angry. The time when the disciples were trying to deter people from bringing little ones to Him is, in fact, one of those seldom occasions.

Like our Good Shepherd, we welcome and cherish the lambs of our congregations. We want them to be nurtured and involved as members of the Body of Christ. And we do so as inheritors of the kingdom of grace knowing full well that His kingdom does indeed belong “to such as these.” †

The Rev. Joe Christina serves Christus Victor Ev. Lutheran Church of Fayetteville, NC, and as the National Home Mission Developer for The AALC.



Congregational Life & Holy Scripture



Kids are Welcome in Church

By Shanda Knight

I saw a little saying the other day: “A quiet church is a dying church. Children make a little noise, but Jesus welcomed them and we do too!” My mind *immediately* flashed back to my daughter being about 2 years old.

She is a quiet girl now but at age 2, she was feisty. Church sometimes seemed more like a wrestling match than worship, but every Sunday, we reminded ourselves how important it was to have our child in church, and we brought her.

One Sunday was particularly horrifying. She hadn’t slept well (so neither had we), she needed a nap, and it was nearing lunch time... We gave her some crackers to keep her quiet during the sermon. At first, she seemed happy, and in my heart, I was rejoicing that I could listen to the sermon in peace as she munched.... Until IT happened! She threw the entire snack bowl crackers ALL OVER the people behind us. She wasn’t dropping them; she was mad and THREW them with force. I was so embarrassed! I wanted to hide. We were trying so hard... but I would have rather been anywhere but church at that moment. It was then the people behind us gave us one of the greatest gifts ever. They patted us on the shoulder and whispered, “Don’t worry about it; we have been there.” I wanted to cry in relief. After church, they told me a couple stories of antics their children had pulled in church. Now those same children sat as reasonable kids in church every Sunday and were such nice kids – I had hope!

Let’s be honest: our daughter didn’t throw her crackers all over someone again, but we certainly had those days where she blurted whatever she was thinking—LOUDLY. She really wasn’t that naughty of a child, but it seemed like if she wanted to act up, she’d save it for worship time. I just prayed to get through the service each Sunday. Every week we would pack a bag with a couple quiet toys and a few non-messy snacks (usually holding them so they were not thrown ever again), and we got through the best we knew how. We were blessed several times by moms and dads who had gone before us speaking a word of hope and being gracious in times when we had a rough Sunday.

Over time, she learned. She learned the Lord’s Prayer—because she was there and heard it. She learned the Apostle’s Creed—because she was there and heard it. She learned the songs and hymns—because she was there and heard them. She started to participate in worship more and more as she got older.

I will be the first to admit: that season of growing was so hard for us as parents, and often we felt like we were failing, but we had her in church—and she was hearing God’s Word—even when she couldn’t totally understand it. Over time she started speaking the words and singing the lyrics. Over time she started following in her Bible and taking notes during the Pastor’s sermon. She grew to know this God who created her, and Jesus who died and rose again for her, and she learned worship isn’t optional; it’s something we value. Over time she started to give when she earned money and volunteer her time in areas where God has gifted her. But it didn’t happen overnight. She had to be immersed in it and be here—during the hard young years.

I want to encourage parents: keep bringing those kids to church—even when it’s hard. It is worth it because they are hearing God’s Word and His Word will not return void (Isa 55:11).

An encouragement for the rest of us who are not in those young parenting years: let’s do our best to encourage those who have young ones! Give a smile and a hug. Let them know they are doing a great job; I am blessed that some people did that for me.

It’s good when we have noise in our church, because some little one is hearing about Jesus. These little ones are our future moms, dads, teachers, politicians, repair people, who will be in our homes, pastors, and church leaders! †

Shanda Knight serves as Director of Children and Family Ministries at Ascension Lutheran Church, Waterloo, IA.



Congregational Life & Holy Scripture



The Comfort of a Christian Funeral

By Sue DeSha

At Christ Lutheran Church in Duluth, we buried more than twenty from our church in 2022. It was heartbreaking, as we grieved with each family, and we grieved our own loss of dear brothers and sisters in Christ. Yet, the Holy Spirit was ever faithful to set the table of comfort with His gifts: the gifts of gathering in the name of our Lord Jesus, sharing the best memories, crying tears of release, laughing despite loss, sharing warm hospitality, feeling love and encouragement, praying, praising, and hearing God's Word of hope eternal.

Great and glorious is the comfort of looking up when we are overcome by the separation of death. The pain of loss is measured by the love shared, and in those first moments and days after a death, our attention is fixed on our own overwhelming emotions, the souls left behind, and the arrangements that must be made. Thanks be to God for our Pastors who help us quiet the pain and gather our thoughts. We are reminded of God's love and forgiveness. We can rest in the finished work of faith in Christ and our baptism. We remember favorite hymns and Bible verses, and we are encouraged to gather and compose those final words and expressions of honor that will help us rest, knowing our loved one is in God's care.

Familiar and well-loved hymns like "Great is Thy Faithfulness" and "Rock of Ages" remind us of God's promises as we sing out to Him, sometimes through tears. Isaiah 61 reveals to us the unfathomable kindness and favor of our Lord when we are broken-hearted. He brings comfort to those who mourn, pouring out beauty for ashes, gladness for mourning, and praise instead of fainting. We are fragile and impressionable in times of grief, and the Lord's presence with us during a Christian funeral lifts our heads and opens our eyes to the hope of spending eternity with Jesus.

After the Scripture readings, the prayers, and family recollections, the funeral service turns to a message of comfort and hope for the family and friends who have gathered. Often the Pastor presents the Gospel message so powerfully that we are reminded of our loved ones' joy in the presence of the Lord fully restored, no longer ill or suffering, and our pain is eased. Our grief is lessened because they are safe and secure, and our faith for today and the future is strengthened.

A Christian funeral is often a time of sharing food and fellowship. It is perhaps the most honorable of family reunions where a flesh-and-blood family joins with their spiritual family to celebrate the earthly life and the eternal life of their loved one.

The Holy Spirit is with us during this time as well. He fills those who prepare and serve in His name with the gift of hospitality. The tables are set with care, using napkins of a favorite color and flowers that evoke a special aspect of our loved one. There's a reason we relish "comfort food" in times like these. Certain foods like meatballs and gravy, fried chicken, cheesy potatoes, ham sandwiches, coleslaw and bars bring back happy memories of holidays, family picnics, church potlucks, and special events.

We give thanks for the women of the church who share the work of their hands and the love of their hearts in preparation for and service of food and fellowship that warms the belly and the heart.

And it isn't only the women who extend this hand and heart of fellowship. Some years ago, the Women of L.I.F.E. at Grace Lutheran Church in Nunda, SD, decided to invite the men to join in their work circles to better serve the church. More hands lightened the load, and the men enjoyed visiting with other men while setting up, serving, washing dishes, and cleaning up. Where there is a need, God provides, and all are built up.

We give thanks and praise for the many ways God comforts us as we experience the death and funeral of those we love, and as we anticipate our own passage from this life to eternal life with our Savior and Lord, Jesus Christ. †

*"In peace and joy I now depart
Since God so wills it.
Serene and confident my heart;
Stillness fills it..."¹*

Sue DeSha serves as co-chair of The AALC Women of L.I.F.E.

¹ Martin Luther, tr. F. Samuel Janzow, "In Peace and Joy I Now Depart," *Lutheran Service Book* (Saint Louis, Concordia Publishing House, 2006), #938.

THE GOOD BOOK IN THE PEW

By Rev. Rich Eddy

I am sure you have seen, either in a church you visited, or in your own church, a rack on the back of the pew in front of you. That rack may hold a hymnal, some offering envelopes, an old bulletin covered with kids' scribbles, or most likely, a Bible.

Certainly, a church that places the Bible there does so to honor God's Word and benefit the worshippers. But does that Bible actually get used, or is it just a symbol of the faith, another churchy decoration like the paraments and candles? Does it play a part in the service, or does it just gather dust?

I ask these questions, not to denigrate the use of pew Bibles. They *should* be there. But if we are to be faithful Christians who believe and follow what Scripture teaches, then the Bible needs to play a much bigger role in the life of our congregations. Scripture cannot be just for show, or something we *add* to our other church activities, but must exist at the very core of who we are and all that we do.

By definition, "The Church is the congregation of saints, in which the Gospel is rightly taught and the Sacraments are rightly administered." (The Augsburg Confession, Art. VII). But how are we to rightly preach or administer the Sacraments, or even know what the Gospel is, or those Sacraments are, without the Scriptures? Indeed, how do we know who are the saints, unless the Bible tells us so? Therefore, the absolute requirement for any church is to teach those things to its people.

Another core necessity for continued biblical understanding flows from our doctrine that the Bible is the inspired Word of God, the only infallible rule for faith and life. As Paul wrote, "All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work." (2 Tim 3:16-17). If Scripture is going to guide our lives, both as a congregation and as individuals, we need to know what it teaches and treat it as our authority.

So, how do we make sure the Bible does more in our churches than just fill some pew racks? Let me suggest the following:

1. Begin with a firm commitment by the pastor and church leaders that Scripture will be an integral part and guide for the congregation. They must agree to use Scripture as their guide for all decisions they make and all ministries they conduct.

2. Preach and teach from Scripture. Contemporary illustrations can help people relate to God's Word, but sermons must not be about the latest theories or self-improvement fads. Preaching should both challenge with the Law and comfort with the Gospel.

3. Teach and encourage a *love* for God's Word, so that the people will want to hear it and read it on their own, in addition to at church. Think of Psalm 1, which speaks of the blessed person delighting in God's Law and meditating on it day and night. If we treat Bible reading as a chore, people won't take the time and effort to read it.

4. Regularly conduct Bible studies throughout the week as able, expanding the teaching to include Scriptures beyond the lectionary. There are many rich and edifying stories not covered in the usual preaching cycles, such as Noah's Flood and Daniel in the lions' den. If all Scripture is God-inspired, we should not ignore any of it.

5. Provide opportunities for members to share their favorite Bible passages with each other, maybe in newsletters or during church gatherings. Hearing others tell why certain Scriptures mean so much to them blesses us as well.

During his time as a monk, Martin Luther had access to only one Bible. It was in Latin and chained to a desk in the monastery's library. Its precious teachings and words of hope and life were not available to the common believers in the churches. One of the greatest things Luther did was to free the Bible from its shackles by translating it into the language of the people, and thus making it available and understandable. He knew the power of God's Word for salvation and life, and the important role it must play in the life of the congregation.

Let us not leave our Bibles shackled to our pews, but use them freely in every aspect of church life, that the Word of Christ may dwell richly in us (Colossians 3:16). †

The Rev. Rich Eddy is Pastor Emeritus in The AALC. You can read more of Pastor Eddy's writings on his blog at <https://pastor-richeddy.com>.

SELECTING A BIBLE STUDY: HELPFUL HINTS

By Rev. Neil Cadle

“Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth” (2 Tim 2:15). Paul is exhorting young pastor Timothy in correct Biblical preaching and teaching, yet his words remain true for all believers—who are called to proclaim the Good News to all the world. Like any other discipline this takes study and practice, and the Church has long offered classes to grow in and share the faith.

Therefore, it is vital that our classes have substance, purpose, and vision. There is no shortage of Bible study materials in publication these days, but how can we in The AALC sift through it and find that which will be helpful, meaningful, and biblically/theologically sound? Below are some points to consider when choosing a study. I pray that each congregation/group might find them helpful as we all seek to rightly handle God’s Word, the word of truth.

- 1. Group Demographic.** General Adult? Women’s small group? Confirmation? Children with a wide age range? It’s important that the material and presentation fit the audience, else it might be above or below their comprehension/interest level. Knowing the intended audience and the target audience of the study is vital for a successful class. Class size is also a consideration. While most congregations won’t find it necessary to break classes into sections due to size, it is a possibility if classes grow too large. Conversely, the conversational dynamics of a smaller class are important to consider. Is the study discussion based? Or would most folks be more comfortable in a lecture setting?
- 2. Subject Matter.** Bible overview? In-depth study of one Bible book? Theological topic (Christology, End Times, etc.)? Practical Ministry (Evangelism, Stewardship, Liturgy, etc.)? All of these, of course, make excellent studies, but perhaps the target audience has expressed interest in or has had questions about a particular subject. That provides an excellent opportunity for folks to enthusiastically participate in a class in which they will likely commit themselves. If not, prayerful discernment or perceiving a need are other ways to decide on subject material.
- 3. Duration.** Short-term? Seasonal? School year? Ongoing? Most Bible studies for purchase have a set number of lessons, and while it is possible for the leader to adjust as necessary, it’s not desirable to overload the class with too much information in a short time. Oversimplification is likewise not a good teaching practice. It’s best to strive to fit the amount of material with the amount of time. This will also help students to remain interested and returning for more.

- 4. Media Type.** While many Bible studies still employ the paper handout format, many are implementing audio/visual (DVDs, streaming, etc.) resources to enhance class time. But does this facility have the necessary equipment to reliably use this material? Does this particular class appreciate such a type of presentation? Does the material encourage “homework” between sessions? If folks don’t engage with a particular format, they’re likely not to attend, regardless of the quality of the subject matter.

- 5. Publishing Source.** For confessional Lutherans, this point cannot be over-emphasized. While there are countless Bible studies (and countless Bible study publishers), it is vital that our educational resources do “rightly handle the word of truth.” For Lutherans, that means they must identify and distinguish Law and Gospel. They must be “all about Jesus” (even in the Old Testament)—that is, it teaches that Jesus’ birth, life, death, burial, resurrection, and ascension were completed for our salvation. They must faithfully teach the “three alones” (Grace Alone, Faith Alone, Scripture Alone) as how God brings us to the knowledge of His salvation. Sadly, many studies cleverly teach works-righteousness, double predestination, limited atonement, “prosperity Gospel,” and all other false teachings that distort the free gift of salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ. It’s recommended that AALC congregations look first to confessional Lutheran publishers for Bible study materials. Concordia Publishing House (LCMS) is an excellent source for faithful lessons (<https://www.cph.org/c-2764-bibles-bible-studies?cat=2774>). Northwestern Publishing House (WELS) also has a good assortment of reliable studies (<https://online.nph.net/education>). Our own Rev. Dr. Jordan Cooper’s site, Just & Sinner, while more scholastic in nature, offers interesting and hard to find resources (<https://www.jspublishing.org/>).

Let’s recall why we have Bible studies: to grow in the true faith, to remain steadfast in times of adversity, and to be an effective witness in the world around us. This is why Paul exhorts us to be diligent, unashamed, and biblically competent. May God bless you as strive to rightly divide the word of truth †

The Rev. Neil Cadle serves Bethel Lutheran Church of Rowland, PA, and on the Parish Education Commission.

American Lutheran Theological Seminary

Meet the Students: Introducing a few from our growing student body at ALTS



Sue DeSha with her husband, Rev. Gary DeSha. Submitted photo.

Sue DeSha

Degree pursuing: Master of Arts in Theology

When Pastor Gary and I sailed south on I-35 from Duluth, MN, to Plymouth, MN, in June 2022, our minds were on the 28th Annual Convention of The AALC and maybe a bit on enjoying time together away. We learned about Sola 500 early and signed up right away, but I was struck as Rev. Dr. Jordan Cooper began sharing about growth and change at the American Lutheran Theological Seminary. I felt a strong tug to go back to school, but I kept it to myself during the week. There was a certainty to that tug from the Holy Spirit, but I didn't have any clear sense of why, or more accurately, for what purpose was I supposed to attend seminary?

I asked my husband on the way home, "What would you think if I started seminary classes at ALTS this fall?" Without hesitation he replied, "I think that's a good idea." So, after connecting with Dr. Cooper about 10 days before the first day of classes, we decided the Master of Arts in Theology was the right degree program for me. I completed my application, sent in my transcripts, and "poof" - I'm a senior seminary student.

My first thought was that it would be fitting for me to advance my writing skills and my theological understanding of the Scriptures, which has already begun. What I didn't expect was to be confronted by God through the voice of Martin Luther in such a personal, devastating way. Most mornings as I work on my assignments I find myself in tears confessing my sins, feeling like a little sister to Brother Martin, and being swept up in prayer.

It is an honor and privilege to be right where I am: being reformed at ALTS by the most Holy Trinity through His beautiful work of reformation in my teachers and their teachers. †



Cameron Swanson with his wife, Chi, and one of their children: Kamden. Submitted photo.

Cameron Swanson

Pursuing: Colloquy

Cameron Swanson was born in 1983, son of Leroy James Swanson and Rochelle R. Gregg. In his childhood he attended many Baptist, charismatic, and Pentecostal churches. Cameron joined the Air Force in 2001, doing police work until 2009. He is a veteran of both the Afghan and Iraq Wars, and is passionate about ministering to people who have experienced trauma.

He met his wife, Chi Swanson, in 2005. Chi has served 28 years in the Air Force and is a Chief Master Sergeant in the Air Force currently. The Swansons live in the DC area and plan to retire there.

Cameron has a Master's of Divinity in Chaplaincy, and 8 units of Clinical Pastoral Education. Cameron has also been through Pastoral Care Intervention I & II (PCI). The course addresses how to assist individuals or communities during a time of crisis, and it examines the impact that crisis situations have upon people, whether it is a psychological and/or spiritual impact. Participants received continuing education credit from the University of Maryland, and the coursework was taught by Coastal Crisis Chaplaincy, a non-profit designed to train first responders, including chaplains.

Cameron is fascinated with Asian culture and wants to work in an international context, specifically with people of East Asian descent. He is called to chaplaincy until God can open the door for short-term missions work in East Asia, specifically in Taiwan, as Chi Swanson is half-Taiwanese. The Swansons have two children, Kamden, aged 3, and Kamal, aged 19.

Cameron became a confessional Lutheran in 2020. He looks forward to being fully rostered with The AALC by God's grace. He is open to a call to a church plant, bi-vocational pastoral ministry, leading an existing congregation, short-term missions, and home missions within a chaplaincy context. †





Congregational Life & Holy Scripture



Hymn Study: “Built On The Rock”

By Rev. Steve Klawonn

For over one hundred years, the logo of Prudential Insurance Company of America has been a picture of a rock, the Rock of Gibraltar. The company chose this logo because the rock image conveys the strength and security that the company offers to its customers. In the Bible, the word “rock” also conveys strength and security.

When we sing “Built on the Rock,” we sing that the Holy Christian Church is built upon Peter, all the apostles and prophets. The Church, however, isn’t built upon them as individuals. The Church is built upon them on account of their strong and secure confession of Jesus Christ.

The original version of this hymn by N.F.S. Grundtvig (1783–1872) appeared in 1837 with nine stanzas. He later shortened it to seven. The Lutheran Service Book (LSB) has shortened it down to five. The two stanzas that Grundtvig omitted included more of his controversial concept of the “living word,” a low view of written Scripture, some specific references to the Nordic region, and some sentiment against clergy.

Apart for these areas that were a bit peculiar and against a huge tide of Rationalism (a belief or theory that opinions and actions should be based on reason and knowledge rather than on the Scriptures), Grundtvig came to value and accept a rather traditional view of Christianity. It is suggested he wrote this hymn because the old cathedral church in 1807 was in ruins after the Napoleonic wars, and he wanted to inspire people who, as the church, are the living stones that make up the church, rather than the crumpled spires of their church in Copenhagen.

*Built on the Rock the Church shall stand, even when steeples are falling;
Crumbled have spires in every land, bells still are chiming and calling—
Calling the young and old to rest, but above all the souls distressed,
Longing for rest everlasting¹*

The opening thought “Built on the Rock” reminds us that even though towers fall and sink into the ground, the church will continue to stand. The reference is from Matthew 7:24–25, where Jesus says that “everyone then who hears these words of Mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the Rock. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on the house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock.” Jesus also referenced Peter’s confession in Matthew 16:16 with the reply, “On this rock I will build My church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.” Because our confession points to Jesus and our faith in Him, He is ultimately our Rock, our strong and secure Savior.

*Surely in temples made with hands, God, the Most High, is not dwelling;
High above earth His temple stands; all earthly temples excelling.
Yet He who dwells in heav’n above chooses to live with us in love,
Making our bodies His temple.*



May 2023

PRAYER BOOKMARK

Stanza two speaks of how God is eternal and infinite, and is not restricted to a specific location on earth or in any building. Acts 17:24 says, “the God who made the world... does not live in temples made by man,” and Paul said to the people of Corinth, “Do you not know that you are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in you?” Yet He chooses to live with us in love and makes our bodies His temple, coming to us in actual time and space by the Holy Spirit through His Word and Sacraments.

*We are God’s house of living stones, built for His own habitation;
He through baptismal grace us owns, heirs of His wondrous salvation.
Were we but two His name to tell, yet He would deign with us to dwell,
With all His grace and His favor.*

Stanza three continues with the thought of believers as “living stones” with Christ as the cornerstone of the Church. Jesus’ promise that “Where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them” (Matt. 18:20) is also included in this stanza.

*Here stands the font before our eyes, telling how God has received us.
The altar recalls Christ’s sacrifice and what His Supper here gives us.
Here sound the Scriptures that proclaim Christ yesterday today the same
And evermore our Redeemer.*

In stanza four, there are several references to the Sacraments as the font, altar, and the Holy Supper are mentioned, which proclaim the Christ who is “the same yesterday and today and forever” (Hebrews 13:8). When we sing this stanza, we pause to reflect upon important church furnishings and how they can be used to teach us the faith.

*Grant then, O God, Your will be done that when the church bells are ringing,
Many in saving faith may come, where Christ His message is bringing:
I know My own; My own know Me; you, not the world, My face shall see;
My peace I leave with you. Amen.*

Stanza five brings together all the elements of Jesus’ words from several passages: “I know My own and My own know Me” (John 10:14), “Yet a little while and the world will see me no more, but you will see me” (John 14:19) and “Peace I leave with you” (John 14:27).

In the strong and secure Rock, Jesus, we continue to confess as Peter, the apostles and the prophets confessed. We as individual members, and together as the Christian Church, take comfort that Jesus is truly present when “the church bells are ringing.” Jesus is present to forgive and to give faith and salvation.

We, as the Christian Church, live with the confidence that Jesus is the same yesterday, today, and forever. In this blessed assurance, the Church continues to faithfully confess the person and work of Jesus. Although the life of the Church and her members remains challenging, we have God’s promise that sees us through till the return of Jesus Christ. †

The Rev. Steve Klawonn serves Prince of Peace Lutheran Church in Evansdale, IA, and as Assistant to the Presiding Pastor.

1 N.F.S. Grundtvig, “Built on The Rock,” *Lutheran Service Book* (Saint Louis, Concordia Publishing House, 2006), #645. Public domain.

1. Commission for Higher Education
2. Dss. Brigitte Gassman
3. Rev. Michael Badenhop
4. For the Regional Conferences
5. Our Nation’s Leaders
6. Faith Lutheran Church, Watseka, IL
7. Rev. Larry Juergensen
8. Prison Chaplains
9. Commission for Women
10. Rev. Nathan Hoff
11. Grace Lutheran Church, Nunda, SD
12. Women of L.I.F.E. Executive Committee
13. Hope Lutheran Church, Hampton, VA
14. Hospital Chaplains
15. International Lutheran Council
16. For the Youth
17. Protection for our military
18. Rev. Neil Cadle
19. Rev. Chris Rosebrough
20. Tartu Academy of Theology
21. The youth to resist peer pressure
22. Unity in the Church
23. Pastors Wives
24. Rev. Len Brokenshire
25. Youth Directors
26. Rev. Michael “Myke” Main
27. Rev. Dr. Tom Stover
28. Rev. Norman C. Hoffeld
29. Seminary professors
30. That God would raise up Church Workers



June 2023

PRAYER BOOKMARK

A Call to Love – Nurturing the Hearts of Young Children

By Amy Giordano



1. West Great Lakes Region
2. Regional Home Mission Developers
3. American Lutheran Theological Seminary
4. Rev. Thomas Baumgarten
5. American Lutheran Church, Mandan, ND
6. Rev. Robert Wallace
7. For churches without pastors
8. Rev. Dr. Jordan Cooper, ALTS President
9. Local AALC church
10. Shanda Knight, Commissioned Church Worker
11. Lucky Mound Lutheran Church, Ryder, ND
12. Protection for the unborn
13. Rev. Rusty Phillips
14. For parents and children
15. Sunday School Teachers
16. To help those being bullied
17. Our Redeemer's Lutheran Church, Williston, ND
18. Ukraine Ministry - Rev. Scott Yount
19. Parish Education Commission
20. Military Chaplains
21. Rev. Norman R. Beighley
22. The Barn Again Lutheran Church Cedar Crest, NM
23. Rev. Phillip Hofinga
24. Rev. Poul Erik Norgaard
25. For Missionaries serving overseas
26. Rev. Robert G. Snitzer
27. For ailing pastors
28. Rev. Scott Neumann
29. Christian Martyrs
30. For prospective Seminary Students

God loves us with such magnificent love. He wants us to experience incredible, life-changing love, mercy, and compassion from Him and from those around us. Christians are tasked with showing that same love to others in all our endeavors. We have an incredible opportunity, each day, to shine Jesus's light into every heart we encounter. What an honor, then, to nurture the hearts of our young children. In Matthew 9:14, Jesus says, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these." We who are called to work with children are charged with the care and keeping of Jesus' most precious lambs!

Amy's Angels Childcare was born in 2012 of a desire to mother my own children, provide for my family, and create a supportive community for families. On June 1, 2012, I opened my home as a licensed family childcare provider, caring for nine children. In 2014, I expanded my in-home daycare to include 18 children and an employee. Amy's Angels cared for my family as earnestly as I cared for the families I served. Finding my call to servant leadership, I focused my efforts on growing my knowledge of child development, earning rapport with the families in my care, and building a community presence as a high-quality childcare provider.

A member of the church since its conception, I was invited into the conversation about a partnership with Light of Christ Lutheran Church in early 2020. Renovating the large basement and allowing me to expand my daycare would be a blessing to so many. Along with providing expert childcare to even more families in our community as well as much needed funding to support



*Top Left to Right:
Amy Giordano started Amy's Angels Childcare in 2012. Photo by Erin Vournas Photography.*

A K9 unit visited the daycare. Submitted photo.

*Bottom Left to Right:
Amy's son, Jonas, having fun in daycare. Submitted photo.*

Amy at the birth of little Ezekiel, the son of one of her employees at Amy's Angels Childcare. Submitted photo.

Amy's sons Joziah and Jonas, dressed up for Hawaiian luau day. Submitted photo.



Light of Christ's ministry of service, I also saw an opportunity for ministry: a call to love. While the church prepared a place for my daycare center, I prepared my heart and mind for what lay ahead. Continuing to operate my home daycare, I also set to work obtaining the necessary education and credentials for the operation of a daycare center. As the construction on the daycare space came to completion, my plans for the daycare center fell into place.

Amy's Angels Childcare LLC opened its doors on February 1, 2022. I and my team have cultivated a safe, nurturing, and engaging learning environment that effectively supports the diverse needs of children and families in our community, creating a foundation for children to enter school as lifelong learners and critically thinking citizens. Additionally, our team works diligently to provide a supportive environment for

children who were not successful in other childcare facilities because of behavior or health challenges. At the same time, I work to provide the staff at Amy's Angels with the same supportive and loving care to foster their own growth as people, parents, and early education teachers.

The culmination of this calling became evident recently. At 1:57 a.m. on Thursday, January 12, 2023, I had the honor of being present for the birth of Ezekiel James, the son of one of my employees. Holding his mother's hand as Ezekiel took his first breath, God's promise of restoration and hope to Ezekiel became evident. God Himself breathed resurrection and hope into Amy's Angels Childcare and Light of Christ Lutheran Church so that we can, together, testify to God's unconditional love for us and His promise of eternal life through Jesus Christ. †

Amy Giordano is a member of Light of Christ Lutheran Church, Williston, ND.

The American Association of Lutheran Churches

921 East Dupont Road, #920

Fort Wayne, IN 46825-1551

Address Service Requested



The
American Association
of Lutheran Churches

The Evangel – Issue 211
May/June 2023



The
American Association
of Lutheran Churches



(260) 755-9401
theaalc@taalc.org



Visit us on the web:
www.taalc.org



UPCOMING EDITIONS...

Please be in prayer for and consider contributing to these upcoming editions:

July/Aug 2023: Seminary (deadline May 1)

Sep/Oct 2023: Youth Edition (deadline July 1)

Nov/Dec 2023: Advent and 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

Or mail: St. Luke Ev. Lutheran Church, Attn: Gretchen Baker
207 Taylor St., Traer, IA 50675