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Be strong in the Lord
and in the strength
of His might. *Ephesians 6:10*



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Editor: Gretchen Baker

Cover Image: A view of God's creation at the Rocky Mountains in CO. A favorite activity by many during The AALC Youth Conference was hiking to Bible Point at the YMCA of the Rockies to see the sunrise. Photo by Bethany Hironaka Photography.

GENTLY LED

Letter From the Editor

In his epic first line of *A Tale of Two Cities*, Charles Dickens begins: "It was the best of times; it was the worst of times..." Personally, I'm convinced he was actually talking about parenting, not a revolution. But that's just my guess (joking, of course).

As anyone who has taken part in raising a child knows, it truly can be the best and the worst. You're laughing with your sweet child one moment, and the next, they're yelling "NO!" and slamming a door in your face.

Oh, what a journey.

From the moment we find out a baby is on the way, parents begin a never-ending quest to raise these little humans into healthy, kind, responsible adults. We research the right diet, the best school option, or the proper amount of social media. We get to know their personality, laugh, strengths, and weaknesses.

But even with all of our efforts, things don't go perfectly. At some point, these sweet babies throw a fit or run the other way when you say, "Stop." We find out they were indeed born with a sinful nature.

Or there's an unexpected medical diagnosis, or mental health struggle, or trouble at school. The world we live in is, well, just a bit crazy at times. People let them down.

Perhaps hardest of all, is when we fail our children. We make mistakes. Our sinful nature flares up again and again.

Reality hits hard; this world is broken, including us and our homes.

The weight of all of it can lead us to despair. Where is the hope for our children?

The source of hope is the same as it has always been: in the Lord.

Here is what God's Word says:

"He tends His flock like a shepherd: He gathers the lambs in His arms and carries them close to His heart; He gen-

tly leads those that have young." Isaiah 40:11 (NIV)

What a comfort to know my child is a little lamb in the arms of her Shepherd. He has carried her and will continue to do so, every step of the way in this crazy world. He is her hope, her salvation, her source of faith and eternal life.

The last part of Isaiah 40:11 is just as comforting: the Shepherd leads us as parents too. And He does so "gently." Not with impatience or irritation, as we as parents so easily tend to do. But with love and forgiveness, the Shepherd cares for us adults too.

The meanings of the three articles of "The Apostles' Creed" give us these reminders: God the Father created these children, provides for them and protects them. God the Son lived and died and rose again for their very salvation. God the Holy Spirit moves in their hearts more powerfully than a lecturing parent ever could.

May this be where our eyes turn every day: to the Shepherd. Let us put all of our confidence in *His* work in our children's lives, not our own.

God holds them close and knows them best. He will bring people, circumstances, His Word, and so much more into their lives to provide for needs we don't even know they have.

Yes, as parents (and caregivers of all kinds), we are called to raise these children the best that we can. We make sure they have food, clothes, friends, and a chore list. We ask how they are, read the Bible with them, take them to church, appointments, practice, friend's house, and wherever life takes us.

But at the end of the day, when your head hits the pillow, look to the Shepherd. He carries your children, and He leads you with great care.

The Editor
Gretchen Baker

Train Up a Child

by The Rev. Dr. Curtis Leins

Train up a child in the way he should go, even when he is old he will not depart from it. Proverbs 22:6

The youth and youth leaders of The AALC recently learned a valuable lesson about Christian sacrifice and service. It seems that the Estes Park YMCA was short a number of important staff persons this summer. At the same time, they were flooded with large groups waiting to receive service. As a result, when The AALC Youth Conference arrived, they encountered a literal mountain of dirty and/or wet sheets, pillow cases, blankets, towels, etc. These dirty linens were in plastic bags, fabric bags, or just piled on the ground, outside of the laundry building. The job of sorting, washing, drying, and folding all of these items would have been overwhelming in the best of times. The oppressive heat and reduced staff made this gargantuan task insurmountable. How would the YMCA ever provide the necessary laundry items for all of their guests?

Instead of complaining about the inconvenience, or just ignoring the problem and continuing with their own scheduled activities, one of our Youth Commission Members, Nikki Hegdahl, had an inspired idea! She suggested that The AALC Youth Conference volunteer to do the work of the missing YMCA staff persons for a few days. She created, and was the first to sign, a schedule for AALC students and leaders to work during their personal time. It would not be fun to sort wet, smelly sheets and towels, to work in the heat and noise of industrial washers and dryers, and to miss their own recreation and personal time. But, our youth and leaders did it cheerfully, and without one single complaint!

As a result, hundreds of people received clean laundry, the YMCA Head of Housekeeping and staff shouted with joy, and the entire camp, including The AALC youth and leaders, learned a very valuable lesson about Christian sacrifice and service. They did not learn it because they heard it in a lecture, or because someone scolded them for not acting like disciples. They learned it because one of their own leaders showed them how Christians live and act, and they followed her example.

Nikki Hegdahl is an exceptional Youth Commission Member and Leader, not only because she has great ideas, but most especially because she is a faithful Christian woman who follows the example of Jesus; and she leads by following His example.

When Jesus wanted to teach His disciples about praying, He gave them an example. Jesus allowed them to see His prayer life, including the moments of grief and turmoil in the Garden of Gethsemane. Do you let your children and grandchildren see and hear your prayers? When Jesus wanted to teach His disciples to love others, He gave them an example. He demonstrated His love for tax collectors like Zacchaeus and Matthew, and for foreigners like the Samaritan and Syrophenician women. Do your family members, neighbors, and friends see and hear you love and care for others? When Jesus wanted to teach His disciples about sacrifice and service, He gave them an example. Jesus took a towel and basin, and washed the feet of His disciples. Do the children in your life see your example of sacrifice and service to others?

Jesus said to His disciples, "If anyone wants to come after Me, he must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow Me." In other words, Jesus called us to follow His example. Whether you know it or not, when you follow the example of Jesus, you teach lessons to others that will train them up, and lead them for a lifetime.

Not many years ago, children had lots of teachers and many examples of Christian faith in action. They were taught Christian values at home, in church, at school, and even by neighbors and friends. Today, that is rarely the case. Many children have no knowledge of the stories of Jesus, the truth of the Bible, or the values and morals of Christianity. It may be tempting to lecture them or scold them for bad behavior. But, a more effective way of teaching may be by setting a good example. Your example may be the only Christian teaching that they ever receive. Your life may be the only Bible that they ever "read."

You can bring blessing and Christian teaching to many children. Like Nikki Hegdahl, you can demonstrate your faith in Jesus Christ when you follow His example of sacrifice and service. Teach children lessons of the faith by what you do, as well as by what you say. In fact, you never know whose eyes are watching or what child is learning from the faithful way you live and act. As the Bible says: *Train up a child in the way he should go, even when he is old he will not depart from it. Proverbs 22:6*

The Rev. Dr. Curtis Leins serves as Presiding Pastor of The AALC.

YOUTH MINISTRY IN THE 21ST CENTURY

by Rev. Dr. Cary G. Larson

In 2005, researcher Christian Smith identified the “*de facto dominant religion among contemporary teenagers in the United States*,”¹ which he coined “Moralistic Therapeutic Deism” (MTD). The creed of this new religion has been collected and categorized through interviews with over 3,000 U.S. teenagers. MTD exists in a three-part central doctrine. 1) A person must work to be a good and moral person by worldly standards to live a decent and happy life. 2) This is not a religion that requires the burdens of repentance, confession, or even absolution nor atonement. 3) MTD involves a deity, who some call “God” or “Jesus,” which prefers to stay at a comfortable distance from one’s daily activities. However, when in a pinch, this deity will gladly intervene upon invitation to resolve an issue that is perceived as bad by the individual. MTD’s central ideology seems to be about one’s subjective well-being, being able to resolve problems and get along with others peacefully, while simultaneously developing positive self-esteem through subjective feelings of gratefulness, happiness, security, and serenity.²

Like any false religion, MTD did not just instantaneously appear out of nowhere. According to Smith, “[MTD] appears to operate as a parasitic faith. It cannot sustain its own integral, independent life. Rather it must attach itself like an incubus to established historical religious traditions, feeding on their doctrines and sensibilities, and expanding by mutating their theological substance to resemble its own distinctive image.”³

How are the congregations of The AALC to love, raise, and teach their young people to fear, love and trust in the true eternal God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit – above all things and equip them to resist the siren call of the false religion of MTD?

One of the Lutheran distinctions is that our doctrines are particularly concerned about bringing to burdened and terrified consciences the sweet joy and com-

fort of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. This not only applies to adults but most certainly to our youth. A word search on “conscience” in *The Augsburg Confession* will yield many instances how we Lutherans are very concerned about the conscience.

A good conscience is only found in the forgiveness of sins and this forgiveness comes from Jesus Christ alone (Heb 9:14). We find in the *Large Catechism*, “*Everything, therefore, in the Christian Church is ordered toward this goal: we shall daily receive in the Church nothing but the forgiveness of sin through the Word and signs, to comfort and encourage our consciences as long as we live here. So even though we have sins, the grace of the Holy Spirit does not allow them to harm us. For we are in the Christian Church, where there is nothing but continuous, uninterrupted forgiveness of sin.*”⁴

The soul mission of the Christian Church is to proclaim repentance and the forgiveness of sins to all people (Luke 24:47). Thus, there is no need to reach for something new or novel to attempt to reach our 21st century teens, as we possess the Word of God and the teachings of Holy Scripture that we find properly exhibited in the Lutheran Confessions. Our teens have consciences that need to be liberated and comforted. We dare not fail them as the false religion of MTD is swift to assimilate them and offer them nothing but destruction.

Speaker, author, and pastor Bryan Wolfmueller (LC-MS) offered guidance on how to minister to our teens and to keep them in confessional Lutheranism and from the snares of MTD.⁵ Pr. Wolfmueller offers 16 suggestions for youth ministry which I will attempt to briefly summarize:

1) Teach our youth about repentance, devotions and prayer. Our duty to our youth is to teach and train them in the Holy Scriptures and to be in prayer.

Furthermore, we need to teach our teens that repentance is a way of life and not a single event (1 John 1:8-9). *Luther's Small Catechism* serves well as devotional material including morning, evening and table prayers.

2) Bring them to worship which includes liturgy and timeless hymnody. We don't have to stay married to the 1958 *Service Book and Hymnal*, but liturgy is nothing more than singing the Scriptures. Why would we not share this with our teens? According to Wolfmueller, most popular praise songs are mysticism which fosters enthusiasm. Enthusiasm is seeking Christ Jesus outside of His external means. Christ is revealed through His Word and Sacraments, not through the means of subjective feelings like gratefulness, happiness, security, and serenity. Our default tainted theology is enthusiasm, which does not endure like seed falling on rocky ground which may sprout but wither and die, since there is no root (Matt 13:20-21).

3) Teach and train them for spiritual warfare. The Scriptures are clear about the evil lies and ways of the devil and the Lutheran doctrines are chock-full of warnings about the devil. We need to talk about the devil, about his diabolical strategy to conquer our teens, and how he is thoroughly defeated by the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ. We need to assist them to take up Christ's holy armor to stand against the foe that desires nothing less than their destruction (Eph 6:10-18).

4) Teach them about vocation. The Lutheran Church offers a comprehensive understanding how we serve Christ Jesus in every godly thing we do. The vocations of son, daughter, brother, sister, friend, and student are the natural vocations God has provided our teens. We need to teach them that they are serving God and neighbor in these vocations now! They don't have to grow up to be of value to the church and their community (Rom 8:28-30).

5) Support Christian peer groups. Peer groups of our teens have the most significant influence on them. Our youth today live in a spiritually toxic and dangerous culture which makes it extremely

difficult to be a Christian teen. The Apostle Paul warns about the negative effect of bad company (1 Cor 15:33) so we need to be purposeful in offering opportunities for our youth to enjoy the fellowship of Christian peers.

Youth ministry is the work of the whole church (congregations and the larger ministerium of The AALC), not just someone who seems to "get the teens," as we are reminded again from the *Large Catechism*, "*Let this, then, be said for encouragement, not only for those of us who are old and grown, but also for the young people, who ought to be brought up in Christian doctrine and understanding. Then the Ten Commandments, the Creed, and the Lord's Prayer might be taught to our youth more easily. Then they would receive them with pleasure and seriousness, and so they would use them from their youth and get used to them. For the old are now nearly past this opportunity. So these goals and others cannot be reached unless we train the people who are to come after us and succeed us in our office and work. We should do this in order that they also may bring up their children successfully, so that God's Word and the Christian Church may be preserved.*"⁶

Rev. Dr. Cary Larson is the Assistant Presiding Pastor of The AALC and the called Pastor to Christ the King Lutheran of Waseca, MN. He is married to Connie, and they are blessed with three adult daughters, two son-in-laws, and three granddaughters.

¹ Christian Smith with Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*, (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2005), 46.

² A helpful summary of MTD can be found at <https://files.lcms.org/wl/?id=KI9bpTItRrJoTsN8X4Re4i2ri0RAMzqi>

³ Smith, 166.

⁴ Paul McCain (Ed.), *Concordia: The Lutheran Confessions* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 2005), 405.

⁵ Bryan Wolfmueller, "Youth Ministry & the Disappearing Demographic. What's Gone Wrong & How Can We Fix It?," Lutheran Concerned Association, last accessed July 25, 2021, <http://player.vimeo.com/video/62216122>.

⁶ Paul McCain (Ed.), *Concordia: The Lutheran Confessions* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 2005), 440.



Youth Gather for 2021 TAALC Youth Conference

Youth and adults from 15 churches across 10 states gathered at the YMCA of the Rockies, just outside the Rocky Mountain National Park, for the 2021 AALC Youth Conference.

104 students plus adult chaperones spent July 11-16 enjoying the view of God's creation while learning more about the theme "Living on the Edge," based on Ephesians 6:10, "Be strong in the Lord and in His mighty power."

The keynote speaker was the Rev. Bill Yonker. Brothers "Swen & Dean" led the youth in action songs and shared funny stories, and husband/wife team "HappyFun-Time" kept the audience entertained with their improv routines, often involving youth volunteers.

The worship team led in music during the morning and evening sessions and was made up of Scott Strosahl, Jason Davis, Chandler Neumann, Mark Wiita, and Pastor Gary DeSha.

Workshops were held twice a day and offered topics such as, "Basic Training for Christian Warfare" with Pr. Gary and Sue DeSha, "Build-A-God Workshop" with the Rev. Dr. Cary Larson, "Are the Pilgrims a Problem?"

with Jason Davis, "Help, my Friend Says She is Transgender" with Pastor Roger Twito, "Finding Your Purpose" with Kris Johnson, "Dating in an Ungodly World" with Brad Longstreth, "Prayer" with Cathy Twito, and "What's Streaming Into You?" with Shanda Knight.

Personal devotional time each morning gave students individual time to read Scripture and study questions corresponding to the daily theme. Youth groups met for small group devotions each evening before lights out.

Afternoons offered free time, a variety hour where students could share their talents, and an option to hike to Bible Point. Two outreach projects were offered: handing out goodie bags to other campers at the YMCA or volunteering an hour of time to assist the YMCA facilities with laundry.

The Thursday evening service culminated in Holy Communion and the opportunity for youth to pray with an adult.

For a highlights video entitled "Living on the Edge | 2021 AALC National Youth Conference Recap," look for the "AALC Youth Conference" Facebook group or search for the title on YouTube.



All photos on this page taken by Gretchen Baker



Harvesting Community

by Bethany Hironaka

In a matter of three months, I went from being a high school youth to becoming a middle school sponsor for St. Peter's youth group in 2020. What a significant shift! There are a lot of things I treasure about my time in youth group: learning and growing in God's Word, increasing my understanding of my faith, and discovering how to put it all into practice through my thoughts, words, and deeds. Now, being in college, there are instances where I long for being back in youth group again as a member, especially when I attended The AALC Youth Conference as a Youth Commission member. When I reflect on my time in youth group, I can't help but be thankful for the experiences that brought me closer to my peers; various events that I was able to enjoy with my friends, thanks to my sponsors.

Though learning more about God and His Word is incredibly important, I have realized that connection with peers is also important; which can, and does, enhance spiritual growth. There is something powerful and comforting about coming into an environment where people can gather together, sharing, and growing in their similar beliefs. Knowing there is no judgment, shame, or out casting for being a believer, but rather: acceptance, love, and even celebration. Creating a strong connection within any group can encourage bonding and understanding, making youth feel especially open to one another.

In a world where being Christian has a negative connotation, kids should be provided events in which they know they can be themselves and not feel ashamed or self-conscious of their faith. Community is valuable, needed, and rare in today's times. Speaking as a student who lived the remaining time of their senior year during lockdown, it's something they will value for their rest of their lives, whether they realize that yet or not.

Not sure where to start? Allow me to share with you what our Youth Directors, Brad Longstreth and Grace Allen, have been doing with our youth over that last few years:

Coffee & Q's: this weekly event is all about youth gathering to ask whatever questions they have or questions they didn't have time to ask during Youth Group or Sunday School. We had coffee brewing for them, or they brought

whatever concoction they bought themselves at Starbucks or Dutch Bros. Our pastors, Pastor Joe Dapelo and Pastor Eric Ishimaru, were even able to come out and answer our youth's burning questions. This interaction and availability with the staff ensure that they are making time for them, indicating the desire to help the youth in their congregation further their faith. Who knows, they may or may not stump you with their questions!

Karaoke Night: though kids may not all have voices of angels, this is a great time of fun and fellowship for everyone. They have been shown to get out of their comfort zones and join their friends on stage! Good or bad, it doesn't matter. As Aisha Tyler says, "Karaoke is the great equalizer."

Game Night: games not on phones, Xbox, Switch, or PS4, say what?! Putting the technology away and going "old school" to play some games face to face is a great source of fun and fellowship. Not to mention the team building that can happen within games. Electronic games such as Among Us or Angry Birds can be turned into real life games, too! Being adventurous and creative together also established bond between our youth and sponsors. Here at St. Peter's, our favorites are: Resistance, One Night Werewolf, and Coup.

Lock-ins: this one is a favorite amongst our Middle School youth. This sleepover can be pretty much anything you want it to be! This is a great time to have fun while also doing a lesson or two along with worship to share God's Word. Food, games, fellowship, staying up late, what more could a teen want?! Pro tip: take a nap or sleep extra the day before; no sleep tends to happen during these events!

Flag Football: right before lockdown took place, we did a Flag Football game the day before the Super Bowl. Though everyone who attended may not have been a sports enthusiast, being included in the fun and games harvested teamwork and a sense of belonging. Go 49ers, right? (Kid-ding. I'm not a sports enthusiast or jock either, so no judging allowed!)

Praise Night: this night is all about gathering together in worship to praise our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Music is a vital part of many teens' lives, and it's something

that already brings them together in many ways. A lot of youth, including myself and maybe some of you, feel the Holy Spirit move deeply within through the gift of music and worship. Offering a whole night of worship could allow them to even open up about things they may be struggling with, allowing them to feel more comfortable with their sponsors and peers.

Not all of these events are fun, and not all of them involve learning. But, hey, it needs to start somewhere. There is a lot more to youth ministry than Sunday mornings, Wednesday nights, and trips like the Youth Conference. Connections made between brothers and sisters in Christ are connections that can last a lifetime and can majorly impact their walk with the Lord. It may be a lot of work

to put on these events, but they bring about such blessings for a youth group. My prayer is that all of your groups grow closer in the name of Christ. Take these ideas, make them your own, and enjoy fellowship in the Lord!

If nothing else, offer free food along with it. Because, really, who turns down free food?

“And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.” - Hebrews 10:24-25

Bethany Hironaka works with the youth at St. Peter’s Lutheran Church in Elk Grove, CA, and is a member of The AALC Commission for Youth Activities.

Favorite Youth Activities

TAALC Teens share highlights from their church youth group activities:

Playing Gargoyles!

-Elliot, Aidan, Lydia, Spencer, Alayna, Kyla, and Meia; Ascension Luth. Church, Waterloo, IA

Small group on Wednesdays, where we can ask questions, have conversations

-Yari; Ascension Luth. Church, Waterloo, IA

“TFC” Teens For Christ: a Sunday night Bible study with a game afterward

-Ashton, Cameron, Lola; Christ Lutheran, Duluth, MN

Riddles

-Daniel; St. Peter’s Luth. Church, Elk Grove, CA

Singing

-Morgan; St. Peter’s Luth. Church, Elk Grove, CA

Serving Soup and Salad meals during Lent

-Kiaya; St. Peter’s Luth. Church, Elk Grove, CA

Easter Breakfast and lock-ins

-Peyton; St. Peter’s Luth. Church, Elk Grove, CA

Volunteering with VBS

-Hannah; St. Peter’s Luth. Church, Elk Grove, CA

Nuk-um

-Abigail, Hannah; Christ Lutheran, Duluth, MN

Toe-tag

-Eli; Christ Lutheran, Duluth, MN

Nine Square

Claire; Christ Lutheran, Duluth, MN

Trips like the Youth Conference, bonding as a youth group

-Sevilla; St. Peter’s Luth. Church, Elk Grove, CA

30-hour fast during Lent on Maundy Thursday into Good Friday

-Lily; St. Peter’s Luth. Church, Elk Grove, CA

Bible Trivia, Scavenger Hunt with Bible verses hidden around the church, ice skating, games, youth gatherings every Sunday and Wednesday

-Youth from St. Paul’s Luth. Church, Napoleon, OH

Hanging out with people

-Isla; Ascension LC, Ames, IA

Games in the dark

-Mara; Ascension LC, Ames, IA

Bible verse challenge: see who can find a Bible verse the fastest

-Jolyn; Ascension Luth. Church, Ames, IA

Campfires

-Lucas; Ascension Luth. Church, Waterloo, IA

Playing games w/ a lot of people

-Max; Ascension Luth. Church, Waterloo, IA

A Game Plan for Sharing Your Faith

by Rev. Joe Dapelo

Photo by Bethany Hironaka Photography

The 2021 AALC Youth Conference gathered around the theme “Living on the Edge” with the Full Armor of God from Ephesians 6 as the primary Scripture text. We’re reminded in Ephesians 6:12, “...we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.”

As I prepared my workshop for the youth and sponsors entitled “A Game Plan for Sharing Your Faith,” I had this verse in mind. It reminds us that our enemy is the evil one, and that people, even those who oppose Christianity, are people for whom Christ bled and died. People are sinners like you and me who need to know the truth and the rescue of the Gospel, not adversaries for us to defeat. This workshop was first and foremost a reminder about the goal that we have as we discuss our faith with others. The goal is to share with them the truth of the Gospel.

But we often set up adversarial conversations (not just when we are discussing the faith), and our goal becomes winning an argument rather than a productive conversation about the truth. Far too many times I have



Pastor Joe Dapelo leads a workshop on “Game Plan for Sharing Your Faith.” Photo by Gretchen Baker.

been in those conversations (again, not just when discussing the faith) when one or both of us get defensive, angry, don’t want to back down, and the conversation goes nowhere. Is that helpful?

St. Peter tells us in 1 Peter 3:15, “... in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect.”

We are to be prepared to give a defense for the hope that is in us. This means that we should be catechized in the faith as the Great Commission reminds us (“...teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you”), and equipped to defend (apologetics) what we believe. It is my hope and prayer that our pastors and churches are regularly looking to equip the people of God in what they believe and why they believe it. But sometimes we forget that gentleness and respect. Sometimes I forget that gentleness and respect.

Gentleness and respect doesn’t mean that we cannot disagree. We must learn how to navigate difficult conversations and topics instead of avoiding them. Our world has told us that we should just avoid topics such as politics



and religion. But this is unreasonable in many ways, and it's especially unreasonable for the Christian to not talk about their faith. The question is how do we talk about it, not whether we talk about it.

In my workshop I highlighted a couple of things to remember when discussing the faith with people we know or people we meet. The first thing was to remember that they are not the enemy that we must defeat, as stated above. The second thing was that our conversations do not need to result in conversion.

Often we think that we need to close the deal and that we didn't do our job if someone doesn't believe what we said and is ready to be baptized. But the Scriptures remind us that it is God who brings people to faith through His Word. The Holy Spirit works. We plant seeds, we water seeds that were planted already, but the work of conversion is always the work of the Holy Spirit. He's the closer.

Mark 4:26-29 says, "The kingdom of God is as if a man should scatter seed on the ground. He sleeps and rises night and day, and the seed sprouts and grows; he knows not how. The earth produces by itself, first the blade, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear. But when the grain is ripe, at once he puts in the sickle, because the harvest has come."

Our Lord is the Lord of the harvest. We scatter the seed, but we rely on Him to do the work. It's not our job to be the closer.

In Colorado, I used a baseball analogy (like all analogies, it breaks down). In baseball, we have a starting pitcher, and you are looking for them to do their job and take you deep into the game, but you aren't expecting them to pitch a complete game every time. You have a bullpen. You hopefully have a lockdown closer. These days you even have "openers." And you're not expecting your pitchers to strike out 27 batters. You're expecting your defense to make plays.

On the other side of the field, you have nine batters in a lineup. Despite the slogan once upon a time that "Chicks dig the long ball," we don't need batters swinging for the fences every time they come to the plate (it's one of the problems with the modern game, but that's for another article). You don't have to swing for the fences, just do your job and get on base, or move that runner from first to second, or hit that sacrifice fly.

We move runners along the path, but we don't have to drive them home every time. As Christians, we're called to be faithful and make the best of our opportunities, but we're not expected to finish the job every time. The pressure is off of us and we're reminded that this is the work of the Holy Spirit who calls, gathers, and enlightens us.

And last but not least, the workshop introduced what Greg Koukl in his book *Tactics: A Game Plan For Discussing Your Christian Convictions* calls the "Columbo Tactic." The Columbo tactic involves listening carefully and inviting others to participate in the conversation, but it is designed around skillfully asking questions to dig deeper, find out where someone is really at before responding, and steering the conversation to the heart of the matter. So much can be done by listening and asking questions without being quick to make your case or get defensive about what reactions you might get.

I'm not an expert at this tactic. I'm still learning how to navigate these conversations. I've made lots of mistakes when discussing the faith with people. But I encourage you to remember those three things: 1. Other people aren't the enemy. 2. The Holy Spirit is the closer, not you. 3. Listen and ask questions. I highly recommend the book above by Greg Koukl. There's much to learn what it comes to tactics and navigating conversations that others might hear the truth of Christ.

The Rev. Joe Dapelo serves St. Peter's Lutheran Church in Elk Grove, CA.



Photos by Bethany Hironaka Photography



SOCIAL MEDIA FOR THE KINGDOM

by Chad R. Steenhoek

When I was approached to write about my break-out session I held at the national Youth Conference, I was a little shocked. Why ask a goat farmer from Iowa to write an article for *The Evangel*? Well, the Lord works in mysterious ways I figured, so I agreed.

I teach the high school Sunday School class at Ascension in Ames, Iowa, and I do this for a couple of reasons. I love kids, and I love acting like a kid! I also do it for the Kingdom reason. We as Christians are in a war, and we need more sheepdogs and less sheep. “Open war is upon you, whether you would risk it or not.” is a line from *The Lord of The Rings*. This is where social media for the Kingdom comes into play. Christians are always at war, but at times we forget we need to be on all the battlefields of this war. The result is we are losing ground in our culture in the area of movies, music, news, and social media. Rather than avoid these battlefields, we can meet them in war and create a positive presence, a Christian presence.

TikTok is a social media platform where people go to watch short videos of others doing interesting things. I like to make videos about myself and my goats. Other people post videos about funny things, interesting jobs/hobbies, or just people dancing to the most recent dance moves. Some are educational, but unfortunately, others are garbage you don't want your children to see.

When I talked to the youth at the conference, my goal was to encourage them to be good at using these tools and how to safely use social media. Youth need to know how to

turn a virtual interaction, most of the time one directional, into a powerful tool for the Kingdom. For example, I have about 15,400 people who follow me on TikTok. When I post a video, roughly 300 people view it. If I do that once a day seven days a week, I would reach about 2,000 people a week. What message am I giving to all those viewers? Simply, I am a farmer who raises goats and other animals in a humane way, and I am a Christian.

Sometimes a simple message is better. “Let your light shine,” a line from a children's song, sums it up nicely. Just be you, being a Christian. The world has a view of us that is false; we break that belief with real Christians living out their lives. The more people we can get to watch us living as Christians, the faster we close the divide between us and our neighbors. The power of social media is that anyone can spend 2 minutes a day making a video and reaching hundreds of people.

A note about safety - do your homework! Your instincts are correct that there is bad content on these platforms. However, it is very easy to avoid and supervise. If you need any help navigating this field, feel free to contact me. If I can't help, I know a guy.

Be honest, be brave, and join me on the social media battlefield!

Mr. Chad Steenhoek is a member of Ascension Lutheran Church, Ames, IA, and led workshops on social media at The AALC Youth Conference.



Offline and Online: WHO ARE YOU?

by *Kris Johnson*

Can you believe it has been 41 years since online chatting began? It takes a split second to share your opinion on politics, marriage/dating, recipes, and faith. Social media has flooded to over a billion users, each revealing organic and non-organic characteristics, spewing the true desires of the heart. Who are you online? Does your online persona match who you are in public? If not, why is there a difference?

It seems civility and restraint has been removed from people's hearts and minds. What is most shocking are the comments by "anonymous" people. These "anonymous" posts sometimes come from people who regularly attend youth groups, choir practice, and church service. How could one spend the better part of the week spewing some of the vilest forms of content online, then wake up on Sunday morning and confess their love for God? John 8:44 calls the Devil the "father of lies" and "void of truth." When I was young, when we were caught misbehaving, we would say, "the Devil made me do it." Well, the Devil did not make me do it; lying was a choice. Your behavior in person, as well as online, is a choice. You choose to submit your heart to Christ, or you choose to submit your heart to the world. You cannot serve both. In the words of master Yoda, "Do or do not, there is no try."

The allowed content and associations among the communities was once patrolled by our Christian leaders. The lines in the sand were drawn by the leaders of the church, but now those same leaders are heavily influenced by malcontented actors and are crossing over those lines and redrawing others. Recognizing that individuals and groups will draw lines to facilitate their personal or perverted end-state is only half of the problem. The other half rests with the decisions that we make when confronted. Our voices and connections directly reflect who we are, and what is in our heart. There are no idle remarks or injurious comments, there are just comments. We mean what we say, and we say what we mean. We give these platforms power, and when we use these platforms to spread anything other

than the word of God, love, and encouragement, we are enabling the Devil and contributing to the devourment of others (1 Peter 5:8).

1. What you showcase through anonymity is your true nature. The digital influence you allow to penetrate your heart will indeed manifest itself in you. If you allow something sinful in, then you are not in sync with God's two greatest commandments.
2. Associating yourself with a particular person, group, or movement, can have detrimental consequences. You do not have as many friends as you think, nor should you claim as many associates as you do.
3. We have the power to influence. History has taught us many things about the hearts of men, and it has also taught us that every technology can be used for evil. Every new social media medium brings forth great opportunity, but it also brings a great risk. Are you focused on how you can enrich your life versus using it to carry out God's purpose for your life?

We must become accountable and transparent with our online messaging. Our online persona is a great part of your witness. God allows us the opportunity to be involved in the most important work in the entire universe. As followers of Christ and stewards of the Gospel, I challenge all of us to be thinking about how we can use technology to bring Christ to the world.

Kris Johnson is a member of The AALC Commission for Youth Activities and is a seminary student at the American Lutheran Theological Seminary.

A BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVE OF GENDER

by Rev. Roger Twito

Right now, there is a sexual revolution going on in our country. It includes a whole array of issues including the question of homosexual relationships and transgendering, and a push to affirm the LGBTQ+ lifestyles. I would like to walk through a Biblical perspective regarding this battleground.

The first foundational piece is answering the question of who is in charge? Is God the creator of the universe or is He not? If He is the creator of the heavens and the earth, then we are accountable to Him as the creatures that were created. If He did not create the universe, then we are the final authority, not God. Genesis 1:1 says, "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth." This indicates that God is the creator, and we are accountable to Him.

The second foundational piece is answering the question as to whether the Bible is authoritative. Is the Bible the inerrant, infallible Word of God, the final authority in all matters of faith and life, or is it not? If the Bible is the Word of God, then we joyfully submit to its teachings and instruction. But if the Bible is filled with errors and misinterpretations, then we can reference it when we agree with it and ignore it when we disagree with it. 2 Timothy 3:16-17 says, "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." The Bible is the Word of God and the final authority in all matters of faith and life.

Given the understanding that we are accountable to God and His Word is authoritative, what does God have to say to us regarding issues connected with the sexual revolution?

"So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them" (Gen. 1:27). The Bible makes it clear that we were created as human beings and we were placed in one of


two categories – either male or female. Every person in the Bible has presented themselves as either male or female. There is not one example of someone in the Bible who was confused about their gender or intentionally attempted to change their gender.

"Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh" (Gen. 2:24). Shortly after the creation of a man and a woman, and prior to the fall, God introduces the covenant of marriage. This covenant is not between two men or two women, but between a man and a woman. There is no homosexual relationship recorded in Scripture that receives the blessing of the Lord.

"If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall surely be put to death; their blood is upon them" (Lev. 20:13). (See also Leviticus 18:22.) God makes it clear in this passage that it was an abomination against God the creator if two men were to choose to lie with one another in a way normally reserved for a man and a woman to lie together.

"A woman shall not wear a man's garment, nor shall a man put on a woman's cloak, for whoever does these things is an abomination to the Lord your God" (Duet. 22:5). What God is saying to His people is that they should not try to present themselves, by the way they dress, as the opposite sex/gender from what they were created. There is no reference in the Bible to someone, when it comes to issues related to the sexual revolution, who went against God's clear instruction and received the blessing of the Lord.

In Romans 1:18-32, St. Paul begins by referencing those who can know that there is a God just by looking at creation, but they did not honor Him or give Him thanks, but instead, they suppressed the truth and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for those things which He created. Therefore (because they did not ac-



knowledge God as God), He "...gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen."

For this reason (because they did not acknowledge God as God), He "...gave them up to dishonorable passions. For their women exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature; and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in themselves the due penalty for their error." The dishonorable passions were women wanting unnatural sexual relations with women and men wanting unnatural sexual relations with men.

Because they did not acknowledge God as God, the list of sins included in the closing verses reflects the all-encompassing nature of their rebellion. St. Paul concludes this section with these words, "Though they know God's righteous decree that those who practice such things deserve to die, they not only do them but give approval to those who practice them." These verses make it clear that the rejection of God as the creator and the one we are accountable to leads to sexual perversion.

1 Corinthians 6:9-10 says, "Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice ho-

mosexuality, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God." There is forgiveness at the foot of the cross for all of these sins (and they all are sins, not just one or two), but that forgiveness necessitates repentance (the desire to turn away), and confession ("I have sinned against God").

Here are two questions that need to be posed to people of God involved in the sexual revolution. Is the abandonment of the birth sex/gender motivated by an attempt to glorify God or a demand for personal rights? Which issue will win the day: being "true to ourselves," or "abiding by the clear teaching of Scripture"?

As those committed to the truthfulness of the inerrant, infallible Word of God, it is important that we "speak the truth in love," as St. Paul admonishes us in Eph. 4:15. Too often God's people have either tried to be loving but unwilling to speak the truth, or we have spoken the truth but in such a harsh way that people feel condemned, judged, and hated. It's only when we speak the truth in love that people will know the truth – the truth that can set them free.

The Rev. Roger Twito shepherds the flock at Ascension Lutheran Church, Ames, IA, and is the Pastoral Advisor to The AALC Commission for Youth Activities.

This article was originally printed in the Ascension Lutheran Church newsletter and is reprinted here with permission.



Regional Pastor Rev. Phillip Hofinga installs the new and re-elected regional officers to The AALC Greater Heartland Region (left to right): Dean Boyce to Layperson on Regional Mediation Board, Rev. Dave Spotts as World Mission Representative, Pr. Steve Klawonn as Assistant Regional Pastor, Ed Kleiner as Regional Chairman, The Rev. Dr. Duane Lindberg as to the Nominating Committee and the Pastor of the Regional Mediation Board, Traci McNally to the Commission for Women, and The Rev. Dr. Dan Schroeder as Clergy Representative Association Council. Not present but newly elected were Chris Soder to the Board of Trustees and re-elected Rev. Bob Snitzer as Regional Home Mission Developer.

Greater Heartland Region Gathers for Conference

The AALC Greater Heartland Regional Conference was held June 8-10, 2021, at Ascension Lutheran Church, Waterloo, IA. This year's theme was "Being the Church in a Hostile World."

28 delegates from nine churches and one ministry were present from Iowa, South Dakota, Missouri, Nebraska, and Colorado.

Special presentations on Wednesday, June 9, included:

- The Rev. Dr. Fungchatou Lo on persecution of the church in Thailand
- The Rev. Roger Twito on Transgenderism
- The Rev. Phillip Hofinga on "Educating Our Children"
- The Rev. Dave Spotts on "Challenges of Higher Education"

Business sessions were held Wednesday and Thursday mornings. Two resolutions were passed, which will next be presented at The AALC General Convention in 2022:

- A resolution to change the name of The AALC to The American Lutheran Church. Several individuals are looking into the legality and feasibility of a name change, as well as a historical look into the names.
- A resolution that position statements and papers brought forth by the CDCR be submitted to the Ministerium of The AALC before being brought to the General Convention.

The 2023 Greater Heartland Regional Conference will be held at Faith Lutheran Church, Holstein, IA.

Wednesday morning devotions were provided by Pastor Scott Neumann of Faith Lutheran Church, Holstein, IA. Photo by Gretchen Baker.



Above: The Rev. Dr. Fungchatou Lo presented on the persecution of Christians, especially those being converted in Thailand. Photo by Gretchen Baker.



Brown appointed Chaplain

On March 17, 2021, Pastor Clark Brown was appointed as Chaplain for the Northern Michigan Region of the Civil Air Patrol (CAP), responsible for five squadrons. In this role, he regularly provides Character Development instruction, provides spiritual counsel for members, prays for the needs and concerns of the membership, serves as an aerial observer, assists the Regional Commander as directed, and occasionally assists in Drill & Ceremony instruction on the Squadron level. Chaplain Brown has recently completed the Rocky Mountain Region Chaplain's College and received the Civil Air Patrol Achievement Award. Extensive continuing education is required to be prepared for a myriad of CAP roles in service to the needs of the National Community.

For those unfamiliar with the CAP, it is the Auxiliary of the United States Air Force; with operational funding provided by Congress, through the USAF. Its members are professional volunteers, with each person having a specialty (or two or three). Over ninety percent of all missing aircraft are searched for by CAP. CAP also responds to a wide variety of national disasters, including tornados, hurricanes, floods, and terrorists acts. At times such as these CAP performs aerial damage assessments, transports and distributes emergency supplies, searches for missing persons, and ministers to the spiritual needs of distressed people. Most recently CAP has been participating in its largest mission to date, the distribution of COVID-19 injection materials.



Photo (l to r): Major Josephine Hendrix, Northern Michigan Regional Commander; and Chaplain (Captain) Clark Brown (AALC Pastor). Photo was taken by 1st Lt. Mary Droulliard.

PRAYER BOOKMARK SEPTEMBER 2021

1. Commission for Commissioned Church Workers
2. Faith Lutheran Church *Columbus, ND*
3. Rev. Arne C. Bjelland
4. Faith Lutheran Church *Holstein, IA*
5. For all the seminary students
6. Family of Christian Martyrs
7. Rev. Chris Rodger Meyer
8. Faith Lutheran Church *Watseka, IL*
9. Future Needs of The Am. Luth. Theological Seminary
10. First Evangelical Lutheran Church *Parshall, ND*
11. Commission on Doctrine and Church Relations
12. Rev. Dale Zastrow
13. Good Shepherd Lutheran Church *Franklin, NC*
14. Commission for Higher Education
15. For the youth
16. Grace Evangelical Lutheran Church of *Deephaven Wayzata, MN*
17. Joseph Adama
18. Tartu Academy of Theology
19. To resist peer pressure
20. Rev. Scott Yount
21. Grace Lutheran Church *Nunda, SD*
22. To help those being bullied
23. For the Regional Conferences
24. Rev. Stephen Unger
25. Hope Lutheran Church *Brighton, IA*
26. Hope Lutheran Church *Hampton, VA*
27. Trinity Lutheran Church *Galata, MT*
28. Missionaries serving overseas
29. Rev. Thomas Jahr
30. Our nation's leaders

PRAYER BOOKMARK

OCTOBER 2021

1. Kongsvinger Lutheran Church *Oslo, MN*
2. Pr. Charles Sandison
3. Lake Madison Lutheran Church
Rutland, SD
4. Persecuted Christians
5. Light of Christ Lutheran Church
Williston, ND
6. Rev. Clark Brown
7. That God would raise up church workers
8. Rev. David Swarhout Sr.
9. Lucky Mound Lutheran Church
Ryder, ND
10. Commission on Pensions
11. Rev. Don F. Ginkel
12. Mighty Fortress Ev. Lutheran Church
Seward, NE
13. Youth groups
14. Parish Education Commission
15. Rev. Dr. Duane R. Lindberg
16. New Hope Lutheran Church
Newfolden, MN
17. Sunday school kids
18. Rev. Dr. Fred P. Hall
19. Mountain View Lutheran Church
Thornton, CO
20. For our schools
21. Rev. Harold E. Petersen
22. Our Redeemer's Lutheran Church
Williston, ND
23. For kids in sports
24. Peace Lutheran Church *Defiance, OH*
25. Rev. Jay Eberth
26. Women of LIFE Committees
27. Our Savior Lutheran Church *Piqua, OH*
28. Parents and children
29. Regional Mission Developers
30. Rev. Jon Holst
31. Shut-ins



Pr. Fred Balke celebrated the 60th Anniversary of his Ordination on June 20, 2021; he is pictured here with his wife, Sue.

Balke celebrates 60th Anniversary of Ordination

On June 25, 1961, Pastor Fred W. Balke was ordained into the Holy Ministry and installed into his first church at St. John's Lutheran Church in Audubon, IA.

Sixty years later, Pastor Balke celebrated the 60th anniversary of his Holy Ordination at his present church at Good Shepherd Lutheran Church in Franklin, NC.

Among those attending the celebration on June 20, 2021, were members of the congregation and friends and relatives of Pastor Balke and his wife, Sue. Pastor Dean Stoner, Administrator of The AALC, preached the sermon for the occasion and presented Pr. Balke with an official proclamation, honoring him for his 60 years of service to our Lord.

Pr. Balke and his wife started Good Shepherd in their living room more than 17 years ago. As the church grew and expanded, the members moved to a rented room at a local motel, later on relocating to the Seventh Day Adventist Church, and finally settled at their present location in a renovated storefront building in Franklin.

Throughout the years of his ministry, Pr. Balke has started or rescued four different churches in Michigan, Ohio, Florida, and North Carolina. He has also held several administrative positions in different Lutheran church organizations. He served as Executive Director of the Lutheran Center in Detroit, MI; as a member of the Michigan Board of Directors for the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod; as Administrative Assistant for The AALC; as Director of the Bethel Series for the Adult Christian Education Foundation; and now actively serving as pastor at Good Shepherd Lutheran Church.

Pr. Balke earned Masters degrees in theology and social psychology before beginning his career in the Lutheran church.

Bible Lutheran Church Gets New Building

by Pastor Norman Hoffeld

Since 1999, Bible Lutheran Church in Dodge Center, Minnesota has been worshipping in a building owned by the Seventh Day Baptist Church. The building was more than adequate, and we had an excellent relationship with the people and the pastor of the Seventh Day Baptist Church.

However, several months ago, our pastor got a call from a neighboring pastor offering us a building for free that they had used in the development of their church. The building had been used by a non-denominational church: Praise Fellowship. In addition to the building, Praise Fellowship also left us the furnishings, a sound system and video system. After prayer, we accepted their offer realizing that having our own building would involve much work.

We immediately undertook the task of getting ready to move into the new building. The pastor called several places and was notified that a free altar, pulpit, lectern, and baptismal font was available from Concordia Lutheran Church in South St. Paul. We arranged to pick up these items and installed them in our new building.

On Sunday, May 2, 2021, Bible Lutheran Church began meeting in our own building for the first time. We also had a local sign company make us a large sign that identified us in the community of Dodge Center. We are looking forward to our dedication service in the fall.

Needless to say, we have been blessed by the Lord and our prayer is that we will glorify Him in the work that He has given us in Dodge Center, Minnesota.

Photos by NoEl Hoffeld, Lea Eldred, and Cathy Moenning (from top to bottom):

1. New sign for Bible Lutheran Church's new building. Previously, Praise Fellowship Church met in the building for five years before turning the building into a youth center. The building needs some work but sports a new sign.
2. Cathy Moenning serves fellowship coffee on our first morning in the new building.
3. Fellowship coffee on May 2, 2021, after the first service in the new building (left to right): Shirley Friese, Mardell, Dr. Duane, and Chris Lindberg, Colleen and Joyce Fredrickson, Roger Friese, and Erik Lindberg (our new building manager).
4. Pastor Norman Hoffeld preaches, this first Sunday in the new building, from John 15 on the Vine and branches. The church will be dedicating the building to the Lord in early fall.
5. Pastor Hoffeld opens the first service in the new building with prayer.



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

Nov/Dec Theme: Advent/Christmas (Content deadline Sept 10)

Jan/Feb Theme: Seminary (Content deadline Nov 1)

Mar/Apr Theme: Developing and Maintaining Men's Ministries
(Content deadline Nov 30)

Church News: *The Evangel* welcomes submissions of what's happening in your congregation, such as:

- Anniversaries of clergy ordination or installations
- Church activities or celebrations
- Men's and women's events
- Youth and children's activities
- Outreach or community events
- AALC clergy obituaries

To submit content, email the editor Gretchen Baker: theevangel@taalc.org

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