



JOY:FULLY LUTHERAN

1 THESS 5:16-24

A message to the Church about the challenges we face and how to face them

"Rejoice always,
pray without ceasing,
give thanks in all circumstances;
for this is
the will of God in
Christ Jesus for you."

1 Thessalonians 5:16–18

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Pastor Matthew C. Harrison
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Preface

“Rejoice always.” St. Paul wrote these words to the Thessalonians, who had “received the word in much affliction, with the joy of the Holy Spirit” (1 THESS. 1:6).¹

In the face of a world that moves from one tragedy to the next, and in a church body full of saints who happen every one to be sinners too, being “Joy:fully Lutheran” might seem a pipe dream. Not so. In what follows I will make the case for the beautiful nexus of being “Joyfully” and “Fully” Lutheran. The Gospel is a joyful message that takes sin away and produces joyful saints. This blessed Gospel of Christ’s free forgiveness enlivens every teaching, every aspect of being Lutheran. “Joy:fully Lutheran” is not a program but a divinely wrought attitude, born of the Word of God, which brings repentance.

A portion of this “white paper” takes up the demographic challenge of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. The facts are elucidating. If we don’t know the facts — that is, why we face what we face — our response will not only miss the target, but we may also be led into unhealthy, unbiblical and negative attitudes that will only exacerbate the challenges, weaken

our biblical Lutheran convictions and rob us of joy in Christ and each other.

After describing the statistical material, I offer some “answers” along the way. We must focus on being biblical, on knowing the Scriptures and acting in accord with the Word of God. We must focus on being Lutheran, on knowing our own confessing documents and the fabulous strength and joy they afford us. Being Lutheran Christians is our gift, our witness and our vocation in this world — for the sake of the Gospel in the world!

I have not dealt with all the issues. We have blessings aplenty. The seminaries are enormous blessings. They are producing excellent graduates. The upcoming pastoral shortage and

low seminary class numbers can only be solved by all of us. I was asked recently at a district convention about what we are going to do about low seminary class numbers. I suggested that each delegate needs to write down two names of prospective students and then give those names to the seminaries for recruitment.

The Lutheran Women’s Missionary League (LWML) and the International Lutheran Laymen’s League (Int’l

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LLL) are vibrant and continue to provide resources and outreach in the name of Christ all over the globe.

The Lutheran Church Extension Fund is thriving and providing dollars for the expansion of the ministry of the Gospel globally. The Lutheran Federal Credit Union is still an infant but growing daily. The LCMS Foundation is likewise thriving and provides planned giving opportunities to extend the work of Christ. Concordia Plan Services is a phenomenal entity that remains financially robust and assures the blessings of stable retirement funds for tens of thousands of church workers and their families.

Yes, we have declined in the number of Lutheran grade schools, but most of the schools that have made it through very challenging demographic and financial times are doing well. In fact, the number of teachers in our Synod's schools is growing. Our universities are coping with myriad challenges and, in the majority of instances, with Lutheran fidelity.

In a day when many denominational publishing houses are closing or in decline, Concordia Publishing

House (CPH) is a robust, stellar institution.

We have some 15,000 people Synod-wide trained in disaster response. Our church is known far and wide for the excellence of its relief work. World Relief and Human Care continues to provide mercy far and wide. Much more could be noted. A multitude of congregations, church workers, mission societies and institutions of mercy serve millions in the name of Jesus.

Our Lutheran Center for Religious Liberty (LCRL), under the direction of the Rev. Dr. Gregory Seltz, is up and running in Washington, D.C.

Below I present my take on a number of challenging matters. It is my prayer that this paper will encourage and strengthen you as a spiritual priest. I pray, that as we face challenges with the Word of God, we will continue to grow together in unity, ever more “diligently joined in unity of doctrine, faith, sacraments, prayer, works of love and such” (SA II IV, 9).² And all of this so that “our joy may be complete” (1 JOHN 1:4).

Pastor Matthew C. Harrison
Palm Sunday 2018



I.

The Lutheran Church — A Church Born of Joy

As adherents of the Lutheran Reformation, we, of all Christians, realize that the Church passes through periods of decline, repentance and renewal. It has and will always be so until Christ returns.³

Repentance: The Ancient Path to Joy

In ancient Judah, King Hezekiah (ca. 700 BC) followed the adulterous reign of Ahaz, who “did not do what was right in the eyes of the Lord” (2 CHRON. 28:1). Hezekiah immediately worked to rid the temple of pagan practices. He restored temple worship. When the throngs came to Jerusalem in preparation for the Passover, they “set to work and removed the [pagan] altars that were in Jerusalem, and the altars for burning incense they took away and threw into the Kidron Valley” (2 CHRON. 30:14). Then they slaughtered the great Passover lamb that pointed to Jesus.⁴ This repentant action of the faithful laity — removing all the idols — had a profound effect upon the clergy. They repented!

The priests and Levites were ashamed, so that they consecrated themselves and brought burnt offerings into the house of the Lord (2 CHRON. 30:15).

The repentant worshippers agreed to keep the feast for an additional seven days “with great gladness” (30:21). The text tells us that this repentance and restoration resulted in jubilation.

So there was *great joy* in Jerusalem, for since the time of Solomon the son of David king of Israel there had been nothing like this in Jerusalem. Then the priest and the Levites arose and blessed the people, and their voice was heard, and their prayer came to his holy habitation in heaven (2 CHRON. 30:26–27).

Repentance! Forgiveness! Worship! Prayer! Blessing! Service! Joy!
They are all of a piece.

The Lutheran Reformation

As we were reminded during this past anniversary year, the Lutheran Reformation was, above all, a rediscovery of the Word of the Lord, with the same results as ancient Judah. The Word of God had been “lost.” The

“temple” had been obscured by human opinions. “They worship me in vain, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men” (MATT. 15:9).

John Tetzel was but the latest and greatest peddler of salvation for sale, preaching, “As soon as the coin in the coffer rings, the soul from purgatory springs!” You see, Albrecht of Brandenburg had become the Archbishop of Mainz, which also carried the title of “Elector” (one of only seven individuals who would elect the next Holy Roman Emperor). Albrecht was both the temporal and spiritual Lord of his whole region — a real mixing of church and state! In order to acquire this powerful position, he had to pay millions to the pope in Rome. To get the money to pay the pope, he had to borrow it from bankers. To pay back the bankers, he got permission from the pope to sell “indulgences” — that is, pieces of paper “guaranteeing” full forgiveness for all temporal punishments for sin. Christ, it was taught, had only paid for eternal guilt, but people had to spend thousands of years getting roasted in purgatory to pay back the “temporal” punishments they deserved. Indulgences were basically “get out of purgatory free” cards — for you or for your deceased loved ones.

The Greatest Eight-Minute Stroll in History

During his five years of teaching the Bible at the University of Wittenberg, Luther had become convinced that humility and repentance were critical in receiving God’s mercy. The full understanding of justification by grace through faith did not come completely clear to him until well into the controversy over indulgences.⁵ By walking the eight-minute stroll from his study in the Augustinian Cloister on the east end of Wittenberg to the Castle Church on the west end, and then posting his 95 Theses against indulgences, Luther ignited a firestorm. The first of the 95 Theses reads, “When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ says ‘Repent,’ He wills that the entire life of the Christian be one of repentance.” Rediscovery of and rededication to the Word of God always brings repentance.

About seven months after Luther posted the theses, something extraordinary happened. Luther came to see clearly what he would call the “joyful exchange” — Christ takes our sin, death and hell; and we, by faith alone, receive His birth, life, perfect faith, good deeds, crucifixion, death, resurrection, ascension and eternal

life! Luther came to see that in Christ we are granted a “passive” righteousness — that is, the righteousness of another, the righteousness of Christ Himself.

Joy Like a Ton of Bricks — Luther Discovers the Gospel

The realization hit Luther while he was contemplating Romans 1:16–17: “For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation for everyone who believes ... ‘The righteous will live by faith.’” Here’s how Luther, at the end of his life, described the joyful moment he realized this:

And I extolled my sweetest word
with a love as great as the hatred
with which I had before hated
the word “righteousness of God.”
Thus, that place in Paul was for me
truly *the gate to paradise*. Later I
read Augustine’s *The Spirit and the
Letter*, where contrary to hope I found that he,
too, interpreted God’s righteousness in a similar
way, as the righteousness with which God clothes
us when he justifies us. ... Here I felt that I was
altogether born again and had *entered paradise
itself* through open gates. (LW 34:337)

Luther experienced genuine, profound *joy in the Gospel*. It changed everything!

It All Comes Together: Joy + Fully Lutheran

Soon everything came together for Luther. The fullness of the biblical witness made him fully biblical (which is to say he became fully Lutheran!). And that filled him with an abiding, unconquerable *joy: Joy-Fully Lutheran*. Luther and our Confessions help explore these joyful central facts of the Christian faith as found in Holy Scripture.

Joy of the Incarnation: God Becomes Flesh

Christ took on flesh and came to this world not as a stern judge but “for you.” “Fear not, for behold, I bring you *good news of great joy* that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior who is Christ the Lord” (LUKE 2:10–11).

Luther: “The little word ‘you’ should make us *glad*. ... Now then what are you? Who am I? Are we not all human beings? Yes, and who other than people are to receive this child? The angels have no need of him; the devil does not want

him. We, however, need him, and for our sakes he became man. It behooves us, therefore, to welcome him with *gladness*, as the angel here says, ‘For unto you a Savior is born.’ It is not a great wonder that an angel from heaven comes to bring this message to mankind, that many thousand angels thereupon also *rejoice*, urging and preaching to us people to *rejoice* over and embrace this graciousness with thanksgiving? We must write the words ‘unto you’ with letters of fire into our hearts and welcome the Savior’s birth most *glad-*

ly. ... Life is too narrow really, our heart too small, for us to be able to apprehend, let alone comprehend, this *tremendous joy* ... *This gladness is so great that were the human heart fully to assimilate it, body and soul would be torn apart and the person would expire.*⁶

The Joyous Gospel of Grace Alone

The Gospel is the righteousness of Christ credited to us as a gift of God, for free (by grace), and received by faith alone. *Joy!*

Finally, my brothers, *rejoice* in the Lord! ...

Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake, I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith (PHIL. 3:1, 8–9).

The Apology to the Augsburg Confession perfectly expresses Luther’s biblical conviction: “Faith is that thing God declares to be righteousness. ... Romans 5:1 says, ‘Since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God.’ This means we have consciences that are peaceful and *joyful* before God” (Ap IV 89, 91).

Again, Luther says,

This is the confidence of Christians and the joyousness of our conscience: that through faith our sins become not ours but Christ’s, upon whom God laid the sins of us all and who bore our sins (Is. 53:6). He is the Lamb of God, which bears the sins of the world (JOHN 1:29). All the righteousness of Christ, in turn, becomes ours. For He places His hand upon us, and it is well with us; He, the

Savior, blessed forever, spreads His garment and covers us. Amen” (WA 1:593).

Baptism Is the Joyous Gospel

Baptism is the gift of the forgiveness of sins. It’s the Gospel! *Joy!*

But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that being justified by his grace we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life (TITUS 3:4–7).

Luther: Heaven which before was closed, is opened by Christ’s baptism and a window and a door now stand open for us to see through. No longer is there a barrier between God and us, since God himself descends at the Jordan. The Father lets his voice be heard, the Son sanctifies baptism with his body, and the Holy Spirit descends in the form of a dove. ... Who would not execrate an unthankful and joyless person who is unwilling to take to his heart the Son who here

stands at the Jordan and lets himself be baptized as a sinner? ... Therefore, it is not powerless water but water in which God’s Son is washed, over which the Holy Spirit hovers, and upon which God the Father preaches.⁷

Absolution Is the Joyous Gospel

Absolution is the gift of the forgiveness of sins.

It’s mandated by Christ (JOHN 20:19–23). *Joy!*

Just so, I tell you, there is *joy* before the angels of God over one sinner who repents (LUKE 15:10).

And we are writing these things so that *our joy may be complete* (1 JOHN 1:4).

If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us (1 JOHN 1:8–10).

Luther: Absolution “consists in this: forgiveness of sin, comfort and peace of conscience, besides *joy and blessedness of heart* over against all sins and terrors of conscience, as well as against all despair and assaults by the gates of hell [MATT. 16:18]” (LW 35:11).





The Lord's Supper Is the Joy-Creating Gospel

The Lord's Supper is Christ's Body and Blood "given and shed for you for the forgiveness of sins" (MATT. 26:28). The Supper is *not* our action to obtain merit for the living and dead! *Joy!*

Luther: "The immeasurable grace and mercy of God are given us in this sacrament to the end that we might put from us all misery and tribulation [*Anfechtung*] and lay it upon the community, and especially on Christ. Then we may with *joy* find strength and comfort, and say, 'Though I am a sinner and have fallen, though this or that misfortune has befallen me, nevertheless I will go to the sacrament to receive a sign⁸ from God that I have on my side Christ's righteousness, life and sufferings ... *The heart cannot but rejoice and be strengthened*' (LW 35:54).

Law and Gospel

The Word of God (spoken or read) is a word of Law (which always accuses us because we can never fulfill its strict demands),⁹ or a word of the Gospel, which is living, powerful and mighty to forgive even as it strikes our ears and hearts and gives what it says! (HEB. 4:12).

"All Scripture ought to be distributed into these two principal topics: The Law and the promises" (Ap IV 5).

Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling ["dividing," KJV] the word of truth (2 TIM. 2:15).

Luther: "This [the Law] is God's thunderbolt. By the law he strikes down both obvious sinners and false saints. He declares no one to be in the right, but drives them all together to terror and despair" (SA III III 2).

The Apology to the Augsburg Confession says, "God's two chief works among people are these; to terrify [Law]; to justify [Gospel] and make alive those who have been terrified" (Ap XII [V] 53).

The Formula of Concord says *mixing Law and Gospel is the anti-joy*. "The distinction between the Law and the Gospel is a particularly brilliant light. It serves the purpose of rightly dividing God's word [2 TIM. 2:15] and properly explaining and understanding the Scriptures of the holy prophets and apostles. We must guard this

distinction with special care, so that these two doctrines may not be mixed with each other, or a law be made out of the gospel. When that happens, Christ's merit is hidden and *troubled consciences are robbed of comfort*, which they otherwise have in the Holy Gospel when it is preached genuinely and purely" (FC SD V 1).

Pastors Are Servants of Christ, and for the Joy of His People

Pastors are not somehow God's designated men who are alone able to acquire merits and satisfactions to shorten time in purgatory or to earn heaven. Pastors are servants of Christ and the people of God, called by Christ through the Church to preach Law and Gospel, publicly absolve sins, administer the grace of the Gospel via the Sacraments, and to love and care for the people, especially the most hurting and vulnerable.

- Note how Holy Scripture describes God's "own heart"! "And I will give you *shepherds after my own heart*, who will feed you with knowledge and understanding" (Jer. 3:15). "The Lord your God is in your midst, a mighty one who will save; he will rejoice over you with gladness; he will quiet you by his love; he will exult over you with loud singing" (ZEPH. 3:17).
- Note how St. Paul described his work in the office of the ministry: "Not that we lord it over your faith, but we work with you for your joy, for you stand firm in your faith" (2 COR. 1:24).
- Note how Hebrews urges the faithful people of the Church to honor their pastors because of the Word of God, so pastors may have joy in service! "Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. *Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you*" (HEB. 13:17).

The Joy of the Spiritual Priesthood

The vocation of pastor is not intrinsically holier than the vocation of any believer. In struggling against the priestly and sacramental system of the Roman Church, Luther came to confess that the truly great and holy works are not poverty, chastity and humble subservience to church orders, but rather the works which are consistent with the Ten Commandments. Great and good works are those of being a mother, father, worker, son, daughter, servant, neighbor, etc.

Luther taught that "priests are born" in Baptism, and pastors are made by call and ordination (LW 40:18).

As *spiritual priests*, all Christians proclaim the Gospel in the course of their daily vocations, pray for all, offer sacrifices of praise to God and perform works of love and mercy to their neighbor. "As priests, we are worthy to appear before God to pray for others and to *teach one another divine things*" (LW 31:355). Pastors are called to speak the Word of God publicly, on behalf of all, by virtue of their calling by Christ through the Church. The Word is not made more effective because a pastor speaks it. But the pastor is called to speak the Word on behalf of all.

As you come to him, a living stone rejected by men but in the sight of God chosen and precious, 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 PETER 2:4–5).

But you are a chosen race, a *royal priesthood*, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may *proclaim the excellencies of him who called you* out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy (1 PETER 2:9–10).

I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a *living sacrifice*, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect ... *Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep*" (ROM. 12:1–2, 15).

Luther taught that by virtue of Baptism and faith, "all Christians are truly in the spiritual estate" (WA 6:407, 13f.; 408, 28f.; 7:628). "Every Christian, who believes in Christ and is baptized, is anointed and sanctified with the Holy Spirit body and soul (WA 6:566, 16f.), is taught of God and an anointed priest" (WA 11:411, 31ff.; 7:27, 17ff.). All priests, because of Christ's priesthood, bring spiritual sacrifices to God. These include prayer, suffering, teaching others about Jesus, serving others in works of love, and praise and thanksgiving.



“Because of the priesthood we are worthy to come before God, pray for others and teach each other the things of God” (WA 7:28, 7ff; 7:54, 24f.; 8:487, 3ff.; WA 3:71, 21ff; 8:252, 30ff; 8:420, 35ff.; 492, 16ff.). The confession of Christ and the teaching of Christ for the spread of the kingdom of God on earth, just as suffering while following Christ, are such holy sacrifices (WA 41:154, 27ff.). These sacrifices can be brought only because of the one sacrifice for sin. They are not sacrifices for sin but praise offerings for the redemption from sin (WA 41:211, 7).¹⁰

The Christian Life of Joy, Even under Crosses

The inner man, who by faith is created in the image of God, is both *joyful and happy* because of Christ in whom so many benefits are conferred upon him; and therefore, it is his one occupation to serve God *joyfully* and without thought of gain, in love that is not constrained” (LW 31:359).

Far from not requiring good works, Luther urged all people to serve Christ in the place God had put them, and to serve God in their neighbor — that is, in the very people God has placed in their lives. The Church had long taught that certain self-chosen crosses like fasting, pilgrimages, self-flagellation, etc., were sufferings that obtained merit before God, and were good

works above and beyond the Ten Commandments. Luther instead recognized that just as Christ suffered in His earthly days, and just as He hid His glory on His earthly pilgrimage to the cross, so Christians follow in His footsteps. Being a Christian in this life will often mean suffering the ridicule of men and even nations. It means that because we cannot throw off all sin in this life, our sins will bring us suffering from time to time. Nevertheless, in repentance, we can cling to Christ in such sufferings, realizing that the glory of God in us is hidden in Christ during this life, and such crosses are meant for our eternal good.

St. Paul recognized the universal challenge of sufferings in the lives of Christians. And yet, joy results:

Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have *peace with God* through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we *rejoice* in hope of the glory of God. Not only that, but *we rejoice in our sufferings*, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us (ROM. 5:1–5)

This is the attitude of Christ himself. The writer of Hebrews adds:

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who *for the joy that was set before him* endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God (HEB. 12:1–2).

Our Joyous Reformation Confidence

At all these points, pre-Reformation teaching had left consciences burdened. That is *the very opposite of joy!* “Poor troubled consciences” and God’s Word as the remedy for such consciences, are mentioned so often in the Lutheran confessional writings that the *Book of Concord* might better be called the “Book of the Free and Joyous Christian Conscience.” The Law was not given to justify. It was given to accuse consciences, terrify and drive sinners to Christ. “For the Law always accuses and terrifies consciences. Therefore, it does not justify, because a conscience terrified by the Law runs from God’s judgment” (Ap IV 38). “The blasphemy of assigning Christ’s honor to our works cannot be tolerated” (Ap XX 81). Quite to the contrary, “The Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all” (Is. 53:6; see Ap XX 82).

The Book of Concord makes many joyous confessions about the free conscience.

Who would not *joyfully* die in the confession of these articles, that we receive the forgiveness of sins through faith freely for Christ’s sake, and that we do not merit the forgiveness of sins by our works? The consciences of the pious will not have sure enough comfort against the terrors of sin and of death, and against the devil tempting with despair, if they do not know that their confidence lies in the forgiveness of sins freely for Christ’s sake. This faith sustains and enlivens hearts in the most violent conflict with despair (Ap XX 84–85).

Our confession calls for *joyous* boldness in living: “Go forward the more boldly!”

The cause is so worthy that we should refuse no danger. To every one of you who has agreed to our Confession, “Do not yield to the wicked, but on the contrary, *go forward the more boldly.*” Do not yield when the adversaries, by means of terrors and tortures and punishments, try hard to drive away from you that comfort presented to the entire Church in our article. Those seeking Scripture passages to settle their minds will find them. As the saying goes, at the top of his voice, Paul cries out that sins are freely forgiven for Christ’s sake. “It depends on faith,” he says, “in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed” (ROM. 4:16; Ap XX 86–87).

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Note how the certainty of the Gospel *explodes into certainty and joy in life* in this explanation from the Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration: [Justifying] Faith is a living, *daring* confidence in God’s grace, so sure and certain that the believer would stake his life on it a thousand times. This knowledge of and confidence in God’s grace makes men *glad and bold and happy* in dealing with God and all creatures. And this is the work that the Holy Spirit performs in faith. Because of it, without compulsion, a person is *ready and*

glad to do good to everyone, to serve everyone, to suffer everything, out of love and praise to God, who has shown him this grace. Thus it is impossible to separate works from faith, quite as impossible as to separate heat and light from fire. (FC SD IV 12).

The Word of God Creates Joy

The Bible is an amazing book. It is “the pure, infallible and immutable Word of God” (Preface to the Book of Concord). It is “the clear Scripture of the Holy Spirit” (Ap Preface 9). Its self-testimony is clear. “All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching for reproof” (2 TIM. 3:16; also quoted in FC SD VI 12).

Jesus’ own view of the Bible is remarkable and definitive for us.

- Jesus believed the Bible came directly from God.¹¹ “It is written, ‘Man shall not live by bread alone but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God’” (MATT. 4:4).
- Jesus quoted Scripture as reliable and authoritative. “You err, not knowing the Holy Scriptures” (MATT. 22:29).
- Jesus believed Scripture cannot err (JOHN 10:35).
- Jesus believed Scripture was given by the Spirit of God. He believes what it recounts as history is true, and precisely in the case of the creation of Adam and Eve (MATT. 19:4–8), and Jonah (MATT. 12:38–41), ironically the very first parts of the Bible most often rejected as myth.
- Jesus asserted that the whole point of the Old Testament, is Himself as the Son of God (JOHN 5:39).
- Finally, Jesus promised His own apostles that the Holy Spirit would assist their memory in recounting everything He had said to them (JOHN 14:26). Just after Jesus promised the Holy Spirit “will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you,” comes Jesus’ overwhelming promise of peace in this challenging world. “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid” (JOHN 14:27).

The written (and faithfully spoken and preached) Word of God is *powerful*. It creates what it says, prophecies, promises and even what it demands in matters of faith. This is stunningly true in the case of the word of Law and Gospel. Perhaps the most grotesque error in popular Christianity today is that the Word of God is somehow information upon which a person must decide. Quite to the contrary, the Word of God renders a decision upon us. It kills and makes alive (1 SAM. 2:6).

Luther: “This [the Law in Romans 1:18; 3:19–20 and John 16:18] is God’s thunderbolt. By the Law He strikes down both obvious sinners and false saints. He declares no one to be in the right, but drives them all together to terror and despair.

This is the hammer. As Jeremiah says, “Is not My word like ... a hammer that breaks the rock in pieces?” (JER. 23:29; SA III III 1–2).

An even more powerful action of the Word of God in the Gospel is to render sinners forgiven saints. “The Gospel is the power of God unto salvation” (ROM. 1:16). The Word of God works salvation (EPH. 1:13). The Word of God brings people to faith (1 PETER 1:23). The Word of God works regeneration and new life (1 PETER 1:23). Jesus said, “The words which I speak are Spirit and life” (JOHN 6:63). The Word of God is living and working in us for life and eternal life (HEB. 4:12). The Word of God works hope in us (COL. 1:5; 1:23; PHIL. 3:20). The Word of God, written and spoken, draws its “energy and authority from its author, who is God” (ROM. 2:2; MATT. 4:4; 2 TIM. 3:16).¹² An encounter with the Word

of God — where faith is created — causes people to become witnesses to Jesus.

Many Samaritans from that town believed in Jesus because of the woman’s testimony, “He told me all that I ever did.” So, when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them, and he stayed there two days. And many more believed because of his word (JOHN 4:39–41).

God bless that Samaritan woman. She brought others to Christ!

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The power that created repentance and faith was in the Word of God spoken by the apostles. *The Word still has power. When the Bible speaks of joy, when this Word strikes the ears, minds and hearts it actually delivers what it states and describes!*

A Joyous Reconsideration of Joy

For the longest time, I regarded the texts about joy as mere Law or command. A serious evaluation of these many texts has completely changed my mind. When the Gospel is proclaimed with an invitation or even a command to believe the Gospel, the Gospel creates and gives the very thing it demands. Think of Peter’s words to the paralytic at the temple.

Peter said, “Silver or gold I do not have, but what I do have I give you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk.” Taking him by the right hand, he helped him up, and instantly the man’s feet and ankles became strong. He jumped to his feet and began to walk. Then he went with them into the temple courts, walking and jumping, and praising God (ACTS 3:6–8).

Where was the power for the man to walk? In the Word of God spoken by the apostle! When Jesus raised Lazarus, He said, “Lazarus, come out!” (JOHN 11:43). The power to raise Lazarus was in the Word of Jesus! Peter proceeds to preach Jesus to those who noted the miraculous healing of the paralytic.

The faith that is through Jesus has given the man this perfect health in the presence of you all. And now, brothers, I know that you acted in ignorance, as did also your rulers. But what God foretold by the mouth of all the prophets, that his Christ would suffer, he thus fulfilled. Repent therefore, and turn back, that your sins may be blotted out, that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord, and that he may send the Christ appointed for you, Jesus, (ACTS 3:16–20).

Many believed. The power that created repentance and faith was in the Word of God spoken by the apostles. *The Word still has power. When the Bible speaks of joy, when this Word strikes the ears, minds and hearts it actually delivers what it states and describes!*

No wonder! The word “joy” in Greek is very closely connected with the word “grace”!

[O]f some 326 occurrences of words used for “joy” in the [New Testament], the most common cognates for joy [*chara*, “inner joy,” and *chairein*, “to rejoice”] are derived from the same root *char* as in the Greek word for “grace,” *charis*. There is a very close connection between the two concepts.¹³

God knows that in this unhinged world — politically, economically, socially, racially, religiously — *we need joy, just like the Thessalonians!* And the Word of God delivers it in spades. Just meditate on the following small snippet of joy texts in the Bible.

- Joy in and over creation (PS. 96)
- Joy in God’s presence (PS. 16:11; 1 SAM. 6:13)
- Joy in repentance (LUKE 15:6; PS. 51:8)
- Joy in forgiveness: “Restore to me the joy of thy salvation” (PS. 51:12)
- Joy over salvation (DEUT. 33:29; LUKE 10:20)
- Joy of John the Baptizer in the womb (LUKE 1:44)
- Joy over the coming Savior (LUKE 1:13FF.)
- Joy of angels over Jesus’ birth (LUKE 2)

- Joy over the resurrection in the midst of trials (1 PETER 1:3–6)
- Joy over sharing in God’s righteousness (PS. 35:27)
- Joy in mercy shown to the needy (PS. 109:16FF.)
- Joy in marriage: “At last! Bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh!” (GEN. 2:23)
- Joy over life’s simple pleasures and gifts (ECCL. 5:18–19; 11:8)
- Joy over childbirth (JOHN 16:21F.)
- Paul’s joy over friendships in Christ (2 TIM. 1:4; 1 COR. 16:7)
- Joy in worship (PS. 122; PS. 43:1)
- Joy over God’s promises for the future; i.e. *hope* (ROM. 12:12)
- Joy in prayer (ROM. 12:12)
- Joy in generous giving (2 COR. 8–9)
- Joy is a characteristic of spiritual priests (PS. 132:9)
- Jesus was joyous over Zacchaeus (LUKE 19:5FF.)
- Jesus rejoiced even as Lazarus died, for what He would soon show — resurrection! (JOHN 11)
- Joy over good stewardship in Jesus’ parable of the talents (MATT. 25:23)
- Jesus was anointed with the “oil of gladness” (HEB. 1:9)
- Joy in the resurrection. “Christ is risen!” (MATT. 28:6; MARK 16:6; LUKE 24:6)
- Joy in persecution (ACTS 5:41)
- Joy in the midst of cross and suffering: “Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us” (ROM. 5:3–5).
- Perhaps the greatest joy of all is that God rejoices in *you!* “The Lord your God is in your midst, a mighty one who will save; *he will rejoice over you with gladness; he will quiet you by his love; he will exult over you with loud singing*” (ZEPH. 3:17–18).

*So, if the love of God has touched your heart,
please inform your face!*

II. Two Challenges

I Challenge You Today: Study the Scriptures!

The powerful Word of God creates joy and much more. It forgives, renews and propels us into life as Christ's own people, with hands and feet to serve, and lips to praise and proclaim His name. "Oh give thanks to the LORD; call upon his name; make known his deeds among the peoples ... tell of all his wondrous works!" (Ps. 105:1-2).

I challenge you today! Let us become "Psalm 1 Christians": "Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers; but his delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law he meditates day and night" (Ps. 1:1-2). "Law" translates *torah* from the Hebrew. It might well be translated "Word of God."

- *There is no challenge the LCMS faces for which the Word of God does not have the answer!*

- *There is no trial you face in life for which the Word of God does not offer counsel, encouragement and hope.*
- *There is no tribulation that the joy of Christ cannot penetrate.*

Friedrich Pfotenhauer, who was Synod president from 1911–1935, dared to speak this truth in a sermon he gave in 1897 when he was president of the Minnesota and Dakota District. It was on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the LCMS. His words are just as poignant today as we move toward our Synod's 175th anniversary in 2022.

Finally, we have cause to celebrate our synodical jubilee with fear and trembling when we glance at the present condition of our Synod. *It is true, we still have the very precious treasure, the pure Word of God.* As a rule, it still governs our congregations, but it cannot be denied that we are no longer what our fathers were. *Indeed, the*



symptoms of the decline are evident and increasing among us. I will only point out a few. The holy zeal to study and grow in God's Word has declined markedly among both preachers and hearers. The boundary between us and the world is no longer drawn so sharply. Our manner of life is not always prudent. Terrible scandals, also on the part of our pastors, are on the increase. While we are richer in earthly things than our fathers, we are weaker in faith and Christian love.¹⁴

Pfotenhauer was on solid ground in calling for a renewed emphasis on Holy Scripture. John the Baptist called his hearers to repentance and faith. Calling his hearers forward to faith in the coming Messiah, his ministry was set in stone in the prophetic Scriptures: "The voice of one calling in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord" (MATT. 3:3; IS. 40:3). Jesus began His ministry by preaching "Repent, for the kingdom of God is at hand!" (MARK 1:15). Soon after, opening the Scriptures and harkening back to the prophecy of Isaiah 61:1 ("The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor ..."), Jesus preached, "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing" (LUKE 4:21).

"Repent! Back to the Scriptures!" That was the message of the Lutheran Reformation. It was the message of the founders who formed the Missouri Synod. And it's the message of every real renewal in the life of the Church. It's the path to repentance, forgiveness, prayer, blessing, worship, service and joy.

The Church in the Book of Acts, vibrant and expanding, was nothing if not the Church of the Word of God. In Peter's first great recorded sermon, he preached Christ on the basis of Joel 2 and Psalm 16. He preached the resurrection of Christ. He preached stinging Law directly to his hearers:

God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified. Now they were cut to the heart. ... Those who received this word were baptized and there were added that day about three thousand souls. And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching (ACTS 2:36-37, 41-42).

As the apostles testified before the high and mighty, friend and foe, they prayed, "Lord, ... grant your servants to continue to speak your word with all boldness ... and they were all filled with the Holy

Spirit and continued to speak the word of God with boldness" (ACTS 4: 29-31). As the apostles set in order the work of mercy among the believers, "the word of God continued to increase" (ACTS 6:7).

The Bible Challenge

Let all of us engage in the rigorous reading, meditating, study and hearing of Scripture.

The Bible itself tells us why.

But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it and how from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation through

faith in Christ Jesus. 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 competent, equipped for every good work (2 TIM. 3:14-17).

The Lutheran Study Bible (available from CPH), quite simply the greatest study Bible ever produced in English, and perhaps in any language, contains a reading calendar. Four chapters a day gets you through the entire Bible in a year.

Apps exist for both your computer and smart phone that enable you to listen to the Bible on any occasion. I've been listening to the KJV (its antiquated English actually helps me memorize text and content) via such an app, and by doing so I've increased my intake of Scripture probably a hundredfold. There are many other helpful tools available from CPH. The *Treasury of Daily Prayer* contains much of the Bible in its devotional schedule.

Pastors, don't grow weary of solid biblical prep for preaching, and for Sunday (and other) Bible classes!

Let the elders [meaning pastors] that rule well be counted worthy of double honor, especially they who labor in the word and doctrine (1 TIM. 5:17 KJV).

I challenge my brother pastors to dust off the Hebrew and Greek! You know that the resources to do so are readily available. You know, too, that the plethora of insight and meaning gained and shared by doing so is invaluable.

My beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord,

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There is no challenge the LCMS faces for which the Word of God does not have the answer!

knowing that in the Lord *your labor is not in vain* (1 COR. 15:58).

Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation, to *teaching* (1 TIM. 4:13).

Keep a close watch on yourself and on the teaching. Persist in this, for by doing so you will save both yourself and your hearers (1 TIM. 4:16).

*Don't grow weary, dear parochial school
and Sunday school teachers!*

Don't lose heart, parochial school and Sunday school teachers! How you have been blessed by the task of teaching God's Word! And what a blessing you are to so many, whether in classes of 4 or 40! My own dear children learned a multitude of Bible stories because of you! To this day I remember my Sunday school teachers with deep joy and thanksgiving. Teach the Word! God's Word "will not return void" (Is. 55:11). Again, CPH has wonderful tools to assist.

Don't grow weary, dear parents!

"As the head of the household should teach" is a repeated refrain in *Luther's Small Catechism*. "Train up a child in the way he should go; even when he is old he will not depart from it" (Prov. 22:6). Paul wrote Timothy, commenting on how his mother and

grandmother were so vital in his belief in Christ. "I am reminded of your sincere faith, a faith that dwelt first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice and now, I am sure, dwells in you as well" (2 TIM. 1:5).

It's a crazy world for parents and children. With piles of homework, sports and other activities, it can be challenging to take the time to read the Bible and Bible stories with children. Hectic schedules war against family meal times. But be encouraged! Your efforts will be greatly rewarded! I suggest *One Hundred Bible Stories* for children from CPH.

Dear Lord God, make us Isaiah 66:2 people!

But this is the one to whom I [the Lord] will look: he who is humble and contrite in spirit and trembles at my word (Is. 66:2).

Your words were found, and I ate them, and your words became to me a joy and the delight of my heart, for I am called by your name, O Lord, God of hosts (JER. 15:16).

A Second Challenge: Read the Book of Concord!

Every LCMS congregation, pastor, church worker, school, mission society, service organization, and auxiliary publicly confesses and swears to uphold the teachings in our *Book of Concord*. Our forefathers at the time of the Reformation confessed these documents



in the face of the threat of loss of possessions, position and even life. A common refrain through the centuries has been that “we only need the Bible.” Yet, the great Lutheran historian Hermann Sasse (1895–1976) often pointed out that in those Lutheran churches where the *Book of Concord* has lost its authority, the authority of the Bible has also been set aside. The Confessions assert and demand the absolute authority of the Scriptures. The Bible is God’s infallible and inerrant Word to us. The Confessions are a faithful response to God and His Word, and a confession before the world of what Lutherans believe, teach and confess. They answer Jesus’ own question: “But you, who do you say that I am?” (MATT. 16:15).

The theme of the entire *Book of Concord* is the consolation and comfort for troubled consciences — and this through the doctrine of justification by grace through faith.

This article about justification by faith (as the Apology says) is the chief article in all Christian doctrine. Without this teaching no poor conscience can have any firm consolation or truly know the riches of Christ’s grace. Dr. Luther also has written about this: If this one teaching stands in its purity, then Christendom will also remain pure and good, undivided and unseparated; for this alone, and nothing else, makes and maintains Christendom. ... Where this falls, it is impossible to ward off any error or sectarian spirit. (FC SD III 6).

This doctrine of justification (Luther’s re-discovery of the Gospel) is the heart of the *Book of Concord*. Article IV of the Augsburg Confession is the Magna Carta of Christianity. It states:

Also, they teach that men cannot be justified before God by their own strength, merits, or works, but are freely justified for Christ’s sake, through faith, when they believe that they are received into favor, and that their sins are forgiven for Christ’s sake, who, by His death, has made satisfaction for our sins. This faith God imputes for righteousness in His sight. Rom. 3 and 4 (AC IV).¹⁵

The Confessions teach that the Lutheran Church is *not* the only saving church (Preface to the *Book of Concord*, 20). Wherever there is enough of God’s Word and Sacraments to cause faith, there is salvation. The Confessions teach what the Bible teaches on conversion, Baptism, Holy Absolution, the Lord’s Supper, Christ as God and man, good works, Christian vocations, the

priesthood of believers, the Church, pastors, limits and freedom in matters of worship, Communion practice and many other things — all with the Gospel clearly in view.

The *Book of Concord* is edifying. It demands that we “examine the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so” (ACTS 17:11). In fact, one major reason for seminary education is that our future pastors are confronted with what the *Book of Concord* teaches so that they may confess in the ordination rite that “I make these confessions my own *because they are in accord with the Word of God*.” That assures that every congregation gets the solid, Gospel-soaked, consoling teaching of the Bible and Luther’s Small Catechism.

The whole system of the Church’s governance is to guarantee, above all, that our pastors and teachers preach and teach in accord with the Bible and the *Book of Concord*. It’s the main job of our seminaries. It’s the main job of church-work training. It’s the main job of every district president, and it’s the main job of the Synod president. Our LCMS founders knew well that true zeal for the Word of God and the Confessions means zeal for the central reason for the existence of the Church: “The Son of Man came to seek and save the lost” (LUKE 19:10).

I challenge you! — pastor, layperson, church worker: study the Lutheran Confessions! Begin with Luther’s Catechisms. Read the Augsburg Confession. Read the Formula of Concord. Check out the referenced Bible passages. *Concordia, The Lutheran Confessions* is a reader’s edition of the *Book of Concord*, available from CPH, with tens of thousands of copies sold. It contains pictures, charts and helpful historical notes. A paperback version of just the text of the Confessions is available for only \$15.

Let’s sharpen our proclamation of the Gospel! Let’s grow in biblical conviction. Let’s grow in unity. Let’s be Lutheran!

Dear Lord God, grant us a renewed spirit that we may confess with our fathers: “By God’s help, we will retain this Confession to our last breath, when we shall go forth from this life to the heavenly fatherland, to appear with a *joyful, undaunted mind and a pure conscience* before the court of our Lord Jesus Christ (Preface to the *Book of Concord* 16). Amen.

*The path to repentance, forgiveness, worship,
prayer, blessing, service, and joy
runs through the Scriptures and the Confessions!*

III.

Where Are We and Why?

“And do not be grieved, for the joy of the LORD is your strength”
(NEH. 8:10).

A Great Big Caveat

The Bible says, “you do not know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes. Instead you ought to say, ‘If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that’” (JAMES 4:14–15). Our wonderful Augsburg Confession states, “Through the Word and Sacraments, as through instruments, the Holy Spirit is given [JOHN 20:22]. He works faith, when and where it pleases God [JOHN 3:8], in those who hear the good news” (AC V 2).

The answers to our challenges will not be found in the science of demographics. The answers are in the Word of God. Our God is a God of miracles, and He can and has acted miraculously and marvelously for the good of His Church throughout history. God has also given us brains to use, along with legitimate “left-hand” gifts (like demographics).¹⁶ It is my conviction that demographics offer us an understanding of our situation so that we may respond in the wisest way with the considerable resources we in the LCMS have been given.

The information which follows is no excuse for lack of evangelism zeal, laziness, poor practice, weak preaching, lack of visitation, etc. These demographic facts may offer an explanation as to why the vast majority of our congregations are facing such strong headwinds. We are in this together. If we better know what’s going on, we can move from fretting to planned action.

Warning: Demographic Information Is Essentially Law

The following information about the specifics of the decline of the LCMS may bring sorrow, anger or despair to the reader. In other words, it has the potential to be a real “anti-joy.” Anger is not good for anything. Paul says we shouldn’t let it hang around beyond sundown (EPH. 4:26). Despair ignores all of God’s promises that “the gates of hell shall not prevail against [the Church]” (MATT. 16:18).

The goal here is repentance and faith under affliction and cross.

I’m Done with Hunches

Like so many of you, my joy has been challenged because of concern over the LCMS. I have been deeply concerned and even disturbed by the four decades of accelerating decline of the LCMS. A few years ago, I began to ask questions. For decades, I have heard all sorts of alleged reasons for this decline, including:

- closed Communion
- open Communion
- contemporary worship
- traditional worship
- inadequate and outmoded theological education
- theological education itself
- clericalism
- laity run amuck
- poor catechetical instruction
- synodical controversy
- the doctrinal positions of the LCMS on creation, women in the church, church fellowship etc.
- suppression of the spiritual priesthood
- lack of mission zeal
- concern for doctrine over mission
- the need to adopt the style of evangelical Christianity
- lazy clergy
- etc.

Someone once said, “Reality is nothing but a collective hunch.” I don’t think so. For several years now, I have been done with hunches, opinions and worn-out saws used to support this or that presupposition about where the 6,100+ congregations of the LCMS ought to be headed together.

I requested Synod’s Department of Rosters and Statistics (run by the great folks who keep track of all the numbers reported annually by congregations and districts) to evaluate the performance of all 35 districts of the LCMS over the last 40 years, with a special focus on the decade from 2005 to 2015. This first step produced some very interesting information.

- *All 35 districts are on the same trajectory of decline in the number of the baptized.* If outstanding missional district leadership were a significant

determining factor in the performance of individual districts, one would expect some districts to significantly out-perform others. But such evidence is lacking.¹⁷

- Districts on the coasts tend to be declining the most rapidly — most in the range of 20% to 30% or more over the course of a decade. Districts with significant numbers of congregations in urban locations are suffering the greatest decline.
- The Michigan District was down 18% in 10 years, and the Texas District was down 7%. These two LCMS districts have planted a significant number of new congregations in the past four decades. Yet even this effort has not been able to stem their overall decline.
- The LCMS has experienced slower rates of decline in rural states and in states which are less secularized. But that does not tell the whole story.

- For example, the South Dakota District is down only 4% in 10 years, the smallest decline of any district, while the New Jersey District is down 31%, the largest decline of any district.

So what is going on?

After obtaining these results, we asked the Rev. Heath Curtis, a parish pastor who works part time for Synod as the coordinator of stewardship, to push further into the demographic issues. We also

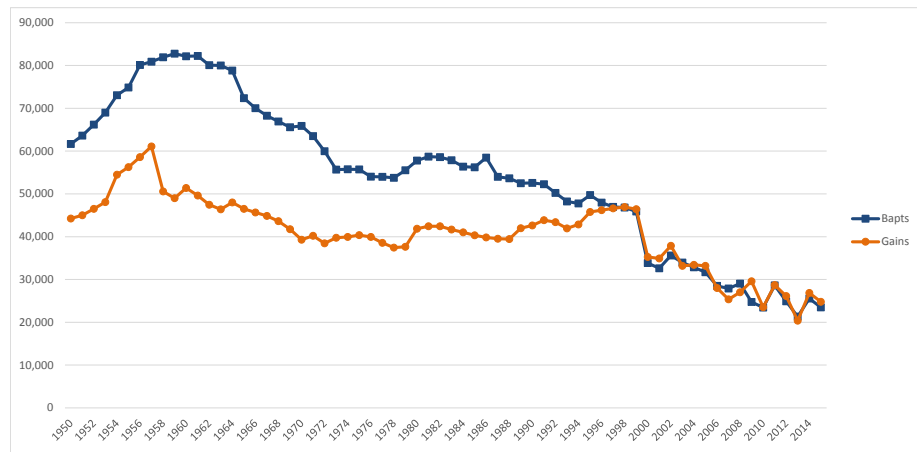
contracted two demographers to conduct extensive studies. I asked Pastor Curtis to investigate the issue of birth rate to see what we might learn. One of our demographers, Dr. George Hawley, provided a study on the effect of birth rate on each of the LCMS districts (excluding the non-geographic districts).¹⁸ In fact, Dr. Hawley's study of the LCMS led him to produce a cutting-edge analysis of the decline of American Christianity.¹⁹

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LCMS Baptisms and Adult Membership Growth 1950–2014



Interestingly, there is a moderate correlation between birth rate and district performance. *Guess which state has had the highest birth rate of European descent Americans? That's right: South Dakota. Guess which state has the lowest birth rate? Right again: New Jersey.* The LCMS is slowly diversifying, thanks be to God! *But 95% of our people are white Americans of European descent.*

The Birth Rate Challenge

A recent study showed that two-thirds of today's Lutheran adults were raised Lutheran.²⁰ In other words, because two-thirds of LCMS membership comes from births/infant Baptisms, a major cause for decline in the past 50 years is easy to determine. It takes a birth rate of 2.1 births per 100 people to sustain a population. A recent New York Times article stated, "In 2016, the fertility rate in the United States was the lowest it has ever been."²¹ The fertility rate for the U.S. is currently below the replacement rate. That reality is magnified in the LCMS as her population mirrors that of all European-descent Americans, whose birth rate is significantly lower than that of the general population. The LCMS birth rate has plummeted over the past 60 years.²²

The following chart provides a great deal of helpful information. It demonstrates a burgeoning membership from the 1950s into the early 1960s caused by the Baby Boom. It shows that adult membership growth ("Gains" in chart) and births ("Bapts" in chart) mirror each other. I believe it also demonstrates that adult conversions²³ and births cannot be pitted against each other. The fact that adult membership growth runs parallel with births likely indicates that many adult conversions have happened in proximity to marriage and childbirth, times when adults often join a church. The graph shows a second minor surge in births about 1990, when a large class of boomers were having children. The last time the Synod

saw any yearly increase in membership was during the presidency of A. L. Barry (1992–2001). The sharp drop that followed (about the year 2000) is explained by the fact that the Synod improved its reporting methods at the time, having previously estimated the numbers for non-reporting congregations based upon the numbers of those who reported. The chart shows that congregations not reporting tended to decline at a quicker rate than those that reported. Please note that we went from a peak of about 82,000 Baptisms per year in 1962, to some 22,000 Baptisms each year in 2015.

Can the Decline Be Halted by Births?

As the demographic studies were shared over the past couple of years, some have responded that we are simply making excuses for deplorable facts. Some have insinuated that I am a "natalist" and even "blaming women" for the decline. That is ridiculous! Do I think that raising the birth rate will be the solution? No. While the Bible says much about the blessings of children and family (PSALM 127), and we

must pay attention to it, significant decline over the next decade and a half will likely continue to occur in the LCMS. Why? Because 57% of LCMS adults are over the age of 50. Only 11% of the LCMS adults are in the child-bearing age group (that is, between the ages 18 and 29). That 11% of the LCMS is simply not enough to effect a change in our downward trend over the short run.

Cause for Rejoicing!

However, there is some *good* news here. We know that the 11% of the

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Here's the good news: 35% of LCMS adults today came in as adult converts. This is a significant number, particularly when we consider the performance of other denominations. Only about 15% of Roman Catholic adults came in as converts! We are doing far better than most church bodies with respect to adult conversions.

LCMS in the child-bearing age are in fact having *more* children than most other denominations, except the Mormons (a non-Christian body) and the Assemblies of God. LCMS families are having more children on average than Roman Catholic families who, by the way, belong to a church that officially forbids the use of contraceptives!

We do know, and should talk about, why young LCMS people (like the general population) are having fewer children than their parents or grandparents. Most young people end up having fewer children than they intend to have. This is due in large part to the delay of marriage and the burden of indebtedness, often educational debt. The expectation that young women should have a college education has had an impact on both of these fronts. Who of us does not want or expect our precious daughters and sisters to pursue an education and serve in appropriate vocations?

While there is Christian freedom in the decision when to marry, we must be realistic about the ramifications of encouraging our young people to delay marriage, as is very common among American young adults today. If we urge our young adults to delay marriage, particularly if they have difficulty

living chaste lives, we may well be subtly encouraging sexual behavior that is not God-pleasing (HEB. 13:4).²⁴ As Christians, we, of all people, know the great joy that God intends for those who marry! “Let your fountain be blessed, and rejoice in the wife of your youth” (PROV. 5:18).

Sharing the Joy

*“The root of Jesse will come,
even he who arises to rule the Gentiles;
in him will the Gentiles hope.”*

*May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing,
so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope.*

(ROM. 15:12–13)

There is cause for joy and hope! It is a common assumption that the LCMS is not any good at evangelism. In recent years, it has been noted that during an average year, 56% of our congregations do not report a single adult gained by confirmation.²⁵ That is shocking. By God’s grace, we can do better. We should, however, be aware of our context.

- 2007–2014: America declined from 78% to 71% Christian.



- 2007–2014: The Roman Catholic Church lost 3 million members in the U.S.
- 1978–2012: The United Methodists are down 18%.
- In the last 10 years: The Southern Baptists are down 1 million members, with Baptisms at a 70-year low.²⁶

Here's the good news: 35% of LCMS adults today came in as adult converts. This is a significant number, particularly when we consider the performance of other denominations. Only about 15% of Roman Catholic adults came in as converts! *We are doing far better than most church bodies with respect to adult conversions.*

Outreach is vital. We would lose our Lutheran Christian soul if we failed to be concerned with the Church's primary mission, the Lord Jesus' own mandate for His Church: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you" (MATT. 28:19–20). Is it possible to increase outreach? God gives the growth by grace "where and when he wills." He also gives us the Word to share, and the people to share it with. So, the answer is yes. But how?

IV. Some Answers

Question: How do we share the joy of Christ?

Answer: *Every One His Witness*

"Have no fear of them, nor be troubled, but 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"
(1 PETER 3:14–15).

Paul says in Romans 15:13 that God fills us with "joy and peace" so that we may "abound in hope"! Peter says this hope causes us to share the faith (1 PETER 3:15).

Are you interested in outreach? How can any Christian say "No"?

We now have, for the first time in decades, a *comprehensive evangelism training program for LCMS Christians: Every One His Witness*. We in the President's Office have worked hard with other LCMS staff to make sure that this material is both

theologically excellent (Lutheran!) and practical. I've taken the basic seminar myself. It's based upon a clear understanding of our God-given vocations, along with specifics like identifying those around us who don't know Christ and/or are not in church. The "kit" is available from CPH and is designed for

a cohort of 12 people.²⁷ Helpful modules on reaching out to people with various backgrounds are coming out regularly. The reviews have been super. Spanish and youth versions are coming soon.

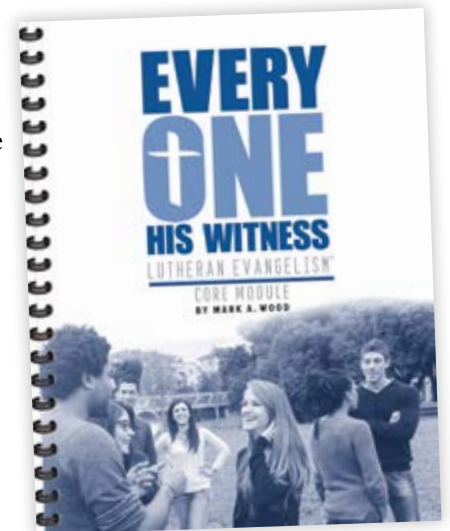
When I travel, I often wear my clerical collar. It's a virtual guarantee that people will approach me and ask me religious questions or to pray for them. Recently an obviously troubled couple walked up to me in an airport and asked for prayers for their family, as a child was just in a tragic accident. I always stop right at that moment, no matter where, and pray. And I always include a witness to the saving Gospel of free forgiveness for all sin in Jesus Christ alone. What a marvelous joy! God uses those prayers and His Word as He wills.

The most joyous experiences I've had involve non-Christians and unchurched individuals who have come to believe the Gospel and have joined the Church because of the persistent joyous witness of God's people. *Every One His Witness* provides a wonderful method for deliberate and prayerful outreach to those around us. God grant us repentance where we've failed to speak of Jesus and His forgiveness! "Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and uphold me with a willing spirit" (Ps. 51:12). "O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise!" (Ps. 51:15).

Question:
How can my congregation develop a plan to meet our challenges?

Answer: re:Vitality

Joy is attractive. I'm not talking about fluff. I'm talking about the "joy of salvation" (Ps. 51:12) brought to real sinners, who suffer real challenges (ROM. 5). Many pastors and congregations would like to re-think and re-energize the mission where God has placed





them. There are many resources available for them. The LCMS Office of National Mission has produced a program called *re:Vitality*. Of course, the “vitality” of the Church is in the precious Word and Sacraments. The goal of this effort is to provide coaching to assist congregations in self-evaluation.

- How can the congregation improve its outreach?
- How can the congregation reach inactive members?
- How can a congregation conduct basic strategic planning?

Nine LCMS districts have partnered with the LCMS Office of National Mission so far.²⁸

Another tool, “Mission Insight,” provided by the LCEF, is very helpful. LCEF partners with nearly every district to make this valuable tool available for free.²⁹ Pastors and lay leaders can contact their district office or LCEF regional vice president to get started.

- The tool provides a demographic report for the area around the congregation/school — either by zip code, radius or neighborhood.
- It identifies trends in population, school-age kids, ethnic mix, income, etc.

These tools can assist your congregation to understand its context and develop a plan for the future!

Question: **What about declining congregations?** **An answer for some:** **Combining Congregations**

Fully half of the 6,100+ congregations of the LCMS are in rural and small-town settings. Many of those churches, as well as those in urban settings, are facing stiff demographic challenges, as we all know. But it’s not all doom and gloom. Some years ago, I ran across two congregations that merged and “made lemonade out of lemons.” The Lord brought two small groups into a plethora of joy. I asked Pastor Robert Weinkauff to tell me their story. He provided the following real-life story about Risen Savior Lutheran Church, Basehor, Kan. It’s an amazing tale of joy.

2007: 100-year-old and 40-year-old congregations — both with 40 people or fewer coming on a Sunday morning, both with decades of financial struggles. Nine miles apart. Both have very limiting facilities in need of repair. Not economically practical to “fix” them. The invitation went out to the leadership of both congregations to come together to address the question: “What if we were to put all of our people and resources together and see what the Lord might do with it?”

2008: The next nine months were spent in discussion, with joint meetings and independent congregational votes. The result was a near-unanimous decision to merge. Neither location was able to be renovated or enhanced. We utilized one facility until we found and purchased an ideal new location. Construction soon followed. One of the pastors continued with the newly merged church, while the other chose to retire and explore other ministry opportunities.

2009: Both former locations were sold. The money was used to fund a new building. We intentionally wanted to have a distinctive, historical Lutheran church, with architecture and artwork to enhance the sacred, liturgical worship setting — unlike what “everyone else” is doing and what you would find on most street corners.

2011: New church building completed.

2014: Entered into the vicarage program to help address increase in children and congregational needs.

2015: Established a cemetery on land behind the church.

2017: Completed a second major building program, which added classrooms, larger gathering hall and a gym.

2018: Launching a K-12 home school co-op academy.

Over the last 10 years, Sunday morning attendance has gone from 60 to 250. People come from 14 different communities for confessional, liturgical Lutheran worship and a setting with expectations of excellence from the pastor, leadership and environment.

We are a congregation made up of mostly middle-class people in a community of 5,000 on the edge of a community of 250,000+. We have no wealthy members (no doctors, lawyers, large business owners) — just people that care, desiring to have a home where Law/Gospel is rightly divided in a reverent Word and Sacrament ministry.

The Lord could have done anything with the

congregations had we not merged and built anew. Yet nothing in the history and current status of the two congregations would indicate either could have done what has happened on their own *unless* we merged and created an environment and atmosphere of the Lord’s blessing in ways we did not ever dream would take place. And He continues to bring many others into the courts of His house to receive His gifts.

This wonderful story is a great blessing from God. By God’s help, it took recognition that something else was possible. Good leadership brought the two congregations together to consider the possibilities.

Solid planning ensued. The vision was realized. The new church is located right on the main highway, a perfect location for growth. Thanks be to God! It’s possible. Luther said that being a Christians means to “dare to believe that one is righteous in Christ.” *Armed with that tremendous blessing, Christians can dare to envision a new future.*

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Luther said that being a Christians means to “dare to believe that one is righteous in Christ.” *Armed with that tremendous blessing, Christians can dare to envision a new future.*

Question:

There are many places we should be but are not! What do we do?

Answer: LCMS Church Planting Tool

Revelation gives us a picture of heaven:

After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, “Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!” (REV. 7:9–10).

There is no more joyous picture of heaven!

We would ignore God’s Word, to the peril of our Lutheran soul as congregations and a church body, should we fail to reach out to all people with the Gospel of Jesus. Partnerships are emerging where congregations are joining with others to serve immigrant communities, minority communities and unchurched people. Thanks be to God! Our “glocal” (“global” + “local”) world makes this even more critical. When our missionaries or partners in Africa reach new groups with the Gospel, we have immediate



lines of opportunity and connection with the same ethnic groups in the U.S.! And vice versa! What a wonderful time to be sharing Christ!

We are currently conducting a study of places around the U.S. where the demographics are most favorable to growth — *places where young people and others are moving, but where we don't yet have churches, and where the LCMS should do well in planting new churches for outreach.* By mid 2018, we'll have information on a host of zip codes most amenable to new starts.

Thanks be to God that we have more and more congregations and preaching stations among people who don't look like 95% of the LCMS. This *must* continue to happen. Such congregations, however, often remain small. If we are to continue to reach out to all people — whether urban, suburban or rural — we need established and thriving congregations to come alongside and help these outreach opportunities.

God grant the joy, strength and vision to grab the opportunities!

Check out the Synod's new church planting resource at lcms.org/churchplanting:

- It is a first-of-its-kind resource for the LCMS in church planting.
- It consists of four one-hour modules, which lead individuals or congregations through the LCMS Church Planting Guidebook.

- It is smart, simple, self-paced and educational.
- It provides helpful theological background for church planting.
- It is specific, with a step-by-step approach to chartering a new congregation.
- It is adaptable to any context.

Question:
What do we do about losing so many young people before adulthood?

Answer: Focus more on retention!

Is there any issue today that causes more angst for families and congregations than that we have only retained 35% of our confirmands into adulthood, for three generations running now? I'm reminded of Jeremiah's lament: "My joy is gone; grief is upon me; my heart is sick within me" (JER. 8:18).

In January 2018, we released a study called "Retention of Lutheran Millennials: 2017 LCMS Study of Young Adults." Some 2,000 millennials were asked open-ended questions about their church affiliation and religious views. Some 400 who responded to the questionnaire are currently not part of the LCMS.

Here is what we know about millennials:

- Born between 1983 and 1999, millennials in 2017 were 18–34 years old.

- Primarily children of the baby boomer generation, they now outnumber that generation.
- They are the most racially and ethnically diverse generation of adults.
- They are changing everything — from corporate cultures, to traditional business practices, to the way we communicate (think social media, crowd-funding, gig economies, meal kit delivery, etc.).
- Social clubs, institutions and venues that once thrived are struggling to attract millennials, and so is the Church.
- Millennials make up a quarter of the U.S. population, but make up only 12% of U.S. church membership. *The LCMS fares slightly better with 15% of its members being millennials (approximately 300,000 of the Synod's 2 million members).*

- A 2017 Confirmation Survey identified around a 1-in-3 rate of retention for individuals after confirmation. An additional 11%, however, occasionally attend their home congregation.
- The large number of young people whose whereabouts are unknown are those who have lost contact with their home church and are likely not attending church at all.
- This retention rate does not take into account baptized children lost prior to confirmation.
- *The Synod's rate of retaining children into adulthood (1-in-3) has not changed in the past three generations.*
- The low retention of baby boomers into adulthood has led to lower rates of babies being born in the Synod (thus, fewer infant Baptisms).
- Already beginning with low numbers, poor retention of millennials has made them the smallest segment of Synod's confirmed membership.
- As millennials start families, the cycle could potentially continue as a smaller proportion of their children are raised in the church.

- *Retention rates are not likely to change on their own. Therefore, for the sake of millennials and the generations to come, retention must be addressed.*

What We Learned

The fact that for three generations the LCMS has retained only 35% of its confirmands is astounding. That means there is hardly a family among us that has not known the pain of a child, parent or family member who has left the Church for various reasons. To help address the issue of retention, we learned a lot from this study of millennials.

- **The largest group** of those who have left the LCMS are, in fact, now “dechurched,” that is, not attending any church.
- **Worship practice** is not a dominant factor in why millennials have left the Church.



The fact that for three generations the LCMS has retained only 35% of its confirmands is astounding. That means there is hardly a family among us that has not known the pain of a child, parent or family member who has left the Church for various reasons.

- **Statistically, Lutheran schools** are a significant blessing in the retention of young people.
- **Longer pastorates** tend to enhance retention. The age of the pastor is irrelevant.
- **Relationships** are significant to millennials. Healthy and positive relationships with parents aid in retention.

- **Young people** who feel that their congregation cares about them and is open to their struggles tend to stay in the Church.
- **Doctrinal issues** or issues of sexual ethics do not appear to be strong factors in millennials leaving the LCMS. What joy to find significant majorities of young people in our churches who believe what the LCMS teaches on doctrine and practice (including closed Communion).
- **Making room** for young people to participate in leadership in some way in the church is a crucial positive factor for retention.

Since the retention of only one in three confirmands is consistent over the past three generations, we might conclude that the millennials (while unique in many



ways) are similar to prior generations. The factors affecting retention today, therefore, may be more similar than not to those for the prior generations.

Catechesis and Strengthening Families Are Crucial

In the following extensive quote, demographer Dr. George Hawley notes how important it is for us to help and encourage young families.

Given the high median age of the LCMS, it will be very difficult for the [LCMS] to avoid continued contraction. Although the current retraction will probably continue for some time, continued outreach and new young families could cause this trend to eventually flatten out, leading to a new period of stability or even growth. A lot of older congregations will probably be gone in a few decades or less. However, the LCMS is far from the worst performer on a number of metrics, based on 2014 data. Although the LCMS has a problem with young people leaving the Church, it has a higher retention rate than Methodists

and Presbyterians. Lutherans should also be encouraged that they do a comparatively good job when it comes to attracting people raised in other religious traditions. A little more than one third of current Lutherans were not raised Lutherans. Despite the stereotype of the taciturn Lutheran that does not engage in outreach, the Church continues to draw new people in. Further outreach should be encouraged. *And although a large percentage of today's Lutherans are well beyond child-rearing age, there is still is significant cohort of young Lutherans capable of creating the next generation. The Church should offer them encouragement and support as they do so.*³⁰

It's time to double down on creative and effective teaching of the faith for our youth. The new, 2017 edition of *Luther's Small Catechism with Explanation* from CPH is a significant tool. It addresses many contemporary challenges and offers a method of instruction that begins with what youth know and think, and leads them into the texts, answering tough questions. Time spent improving our teaching will be met with rewards.



We learned that congregations with youth attract and retain youth better. But the most important thing we learned from the young people themselves was that *family relationships are crucial*. Working on healthy, forgiving families in our churches is vital. Spiritual priests speak forgiveness! “Equip the saints!” (EPH. 4:12). And this especially in their own homes! *We learned that the age of the pastor is not a significant factor in retention!* And we also learned from those interviewed who had left the LCMS, that a strong majority believe their pastors love them. *That’s a testament to great pastors!*

- **Time spent** encouraging parents to pray with their children and have home devotions will pay off.
- **Intentional efforts** in inviting youth to participate in congregational leadership, in service to others, mission trips, in ushering, in VBS, etc. will pay dividends in retention.
- **Young people** who have participated in the Synod’s National Youth Gathering or a Higher Things conference have a higher rate of retention. At these events, young people see that they are not alone. Get your kids to these events!
- **Recognizing milestones** in the life of our children is very important. Baptism, baptismal anniversaries, first Bible, first Catechism, confirmation, marriage — all provide opportunities and should be treated with the utmost care and attention. Connecting young people with campus ministries is important. Our Synod’s campus pastors are doing a tremendous job, but they need names and contacts!

Finally, I should note that *our congregations have no idea where fully one-third of their youth have gone*, and too many have not kept adequate baptismal and confirmation records. We can up our game here and across the board. Our LCMS Youth Department does a terrific job and will be your support and aid in all these tasks!

But the most important thing we learned from the young people themselves was that family relationships are crucial. Working on healthy forgiving families in our churches is vital. Spiritual priests speak forgiveness! “Equip the saints!” (Eph. 4:12). And this especially in their own homes!

A Real-Life Case of Joyous Millennial Mercy

I recently spoke to a pastor in Indiana who has done a tremendous job with youth, especially conversions to Christ among millennials. I asked him what he was doing. He emphasized that he finds young people interested in ideas like love and community, mercy and service. He affirms these values and then shows the young people how deep

these values run in the Scriptures and in the life of the Church. He teaches the points of contact for these profound truths in the Church’s liturgy and worship. Indeed, there is so much more to Christianity than they might have dreamed!

He also told me that these people are not “joiners” in the traditional sense. They don’t want to go to meetings. But they will come out to take action. He formed a group for young women called “Sisters of Mercy.” Every Sunday afternoon they gather. He leads them in a substantive Bible study of Christ and His mercy. Then leaders share with them contacts for those in the congregation and community who are in need of Christ’s mercy. During the following week, the young women visit the needy. It’s been tremendously successful.

Witness, Mercy and Life Together are profound blessings and tools to deepen the spiritual lives of people and reach those in need of Jesus. Amen!

We Are in This Together

“So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind”

(PHIL. 2:1–2).

C.F.W. Walther famously stated that the Synod has no power but the Word of God.³¹ Our congregations have tremendous independence. The LCMS Constitution requires our churches and workers to be Lutheran and to believe and act in accord with Holy Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions. But there is no power either for district or Synod leadership to force a congregation



to utilize this or that program. The Synod does not have a corporate structure, nor would we want such a structure. The self-governance of the local congregation to assess its local circumstances and act responsibly in the work of the Gospel, within the limits of our confessional commitments, is a tremendous strength. I've always been convinced that just as most problems are local, so also are most solutions.

I think it's also vital to realize that all our churches and schools are feeling the pressure. Many of the congregations which were the largest in Synod 20 years ago have declined at a pace similar to the Synod overall. Even the largest LCMS congregations today experienced faster growth 10 to 20 years ago than they have in the past 10 years.³²

We have many congregations that, because of personnel, circumstance, location, focus, etc., are doing well. The majority of congregations, however, find themselves in increasingly challenging situations. Young adults leave rural areas for education and for work. Cities shift,

secularize and change in ethnic makeup. Neighborhoods decline and gentrify. Loss of manufacturing jobs in many communities has removed the traditional base of the Lutheran church. Church attendance overall in the U.S. is down. The millennials are particularly noted for a general loss of religious identification. Marriage is postponed — often due to educational debt, and the change of sexual habits of young Americans has become a factor. Postponed marriage means fewer children. Many of our congregations, even with the best of

intentions and best-laid plans, have not been able to elude decline.

These facts should not be used as excuses for lack of effort, poor planning, weak preaching, and lack of mission zeal. As a human organization, the Church will always suffer sin and human failing (the New Testament is full of such incidences). But here's the bottom line: We are in this together.

A pastor and congregation in South Dakota (although there are challenges aplenty in South Dakota) will likely not face

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We must find ways to “hold up the prophet’s arms” while realizing that the going will be tough for many. Yet, we need churches, we need to be preaching the Gospel in challenging communities and circumstances. The Lord Himself has given us His message to be proclaimed wherever there are souls in need of His salvation.

challenges of the caliber by those faced in New Jersey.

The LCMS has its warts and shortcomings. But, in general, the decline we are experiencing is something we are *all* facing. It's happening not because our pastors or church workers are somehow lazy, or because our laity somehow don't care about the Gospel! We must find ways to "hold up the prophet's arms" while realizing that the going will be tough for many. Yet, we need churches, we need to be preaching the Gospel in challenging communities and circumstances. The Lord Himself has given us His message to be proclaimed wherever there are souls in need of His salvation.

Question: What do healthy congregations look like?

Some Answers

In surveying a number of district presidents, I asked them to reflect upon congregations that are doing well in their circumstances. That may mean just "holding their own" in a challenging demographic. Certain patterns emerge, from which we can all learn. I'm a firm believer that from the parish pastor in the smallest corner or most challenged situation to the Synod president, we can all improve our game by the grace of God. "It is my eager expectation and hope that I will not be at all ashamed, but that with full *courage* now as always Christ will be honored in my body, whether by life or by death" (PHIL. 1:20).

Here are some of the questions I asked, and typical answers received:

Harrison: As you survey the district, what are you seeing in congregations that are succeeding (and I would add, holding their own in challenging circumstances would be "success" in many cases)?

DP: A key factor with congregations that are "succeeding" is that they have an Acts 1:8 approach that focuses on global, national and local mission. They provide opportunities to serve through mission trips, and they support district mission endeavors. They seek to make inroads



The pastor must be visible in the community. He must "do the work of an evangelist" and get out of his office to engage the community, not just members of the congregation. Above all, the members need to be in the Word! This is imperative.

into the community through service projects, hosting appreciation events (e.g., for local law enforcement and other caregivers), offering classes, etc. — all of which provide the opportunity to invite people outside of the Church to "come and see" (join us for worship). Even their budgets are laid out in such a way that you clearly see their mission focus.

Harrison: What are factors that you think are key for a healthy congregation (rural, small town, city)?

DP: The pastor *must* be visible in the community. He must "do the work of an evangelist" and get out of his office to engage the community, not just members of the congregation. Above all, the members *need* to be in the Word! This is imperative. The pastor must also be a student of the Word, as well as involved in the lives of his members, so that he knows their struggles and can apply the Word of life to their lives. He should really work on his preaching,³³ and worship should be done well.

It's important to have a website and keep it up to date with current and upcoming events. Utilize electronic media. Building and maintaining relationships is critical.

Harrison: What are the most critical issues?

DP: Getting people involved in Bible study! If the congregation is going to be healthy, mission-focused and able to deal with conflict in a God-pleasing way, it's imperative to be in the Word of God. It's only through the Word of God that we will be focused and empowered to carry out the mission that the Lord has entrusted and privileged us to do in His name.

A joyful atmosphere must pervade all that the congregation does. If members aren't excited about their congregation, how do we expect that anyone else will be? We must be *intentional* about inviting, reaching out, serving and offering opportunities to grow in Christ!



Question: Where do we start?

Answer: Visitation!

And after some days Paul said to Barnabas, "Let us return and visit the brothers in every city where we proclaimed the word of the Lord, and see how they are"
(ACTS 15:36).

Visitation is crucial. Every year I speak to seminarians. The other day a young pastor approached me in Illinois. "Pastor Harrison, I want to tell you that I listened carefully to your encouragement to our class five years ago when you spoke at the St. Louis seminary. I took your advice. I visit our members. I'm visible in the community. Any visitor who leaves a phone number gets a call from me within the week. If they leave an address, I visit their home. If a member has not been in church for three weeks, I write them a note. I don't say, 'Hey, where have you been,' but rather, 'I've noticed you've missed church lately, and I'm writing to make sure you are okay.' Our small congregation is growing." As this young pastor told me his story, his head elder was standing next to him beaming with pride.

"A home-going pastor makes a church-going people." I still remember the first time I ever heard that

statement from the lips of the Rev. Dr. Robert Preus at the Fort Wayne seminary. Before I began serving my first parish, I had also stumbled across the section in Walther's *Pastoral Theology* in which he instructs pastors about the importance of visitation and how to visit the homes of parishioners.³⁴ Combined with good effort at preaching, there is simply nothing so singularly significant in the pastor-people relationship for the well-being of the congregation.

As I was beginning to learn the peoples' names at my first parish, I called Harry the wrong name every time he came through the greeting line. After three weeks Harry, an upstanding member of the congregation, finally had enough. "John Schmidt' right?" I said on the way out of church that Sunday. Harry looked at me with disgust and said tersely, "I'm gonna get a *name tag* for next Sunday" and bolted for the door, frowning. When everyone had left, I walked over to the parsonage and asked Kathy to hold lunch. I drove out to Harry's place and apologized. I got to know him. I got to see him in his context. I found out about his life, his challenges and his family. He very graciously forgave me, and I never forgot his name again. We became fast friends. I had the honor

of confirming his grandchildren. It was only later that I realized that I'd been calling him by the name of another man in the parish who was very inactive and had a rather notorious reputation for unsavory behavior! I still chuckle as I remember the incident.

It's a marvelous gift when the Lord allows a tense and bungled situation to be infused with forgiveness, humor, and joy!

Visitation is often more challenging in urban situations. Many people no longer want a pastor in their homes.

Pastors are responding to that trend by meeting in a coffee shop or another non-threatening environment. These visits should not be rigorous theological interviews but pastoral visits of love and concern, listening to the flock and their challenges and joys, and sharing Christ's Word.

Since the 2013 Synod convention, we've beefed up and emphasized visitation on the Synod level. We renamed circuit counselors as "circuit visitors." The Gospel and Sacraments make us the Church. Visitation is the practical glue that helps us live in the unity Christ give us, and encourages the use of Gospel and Sacraments. Luther wrote in his "Saxon Visitation Articles" of 1528 that real bishops ("overseers" or "pastors") are to be visitors. Luther wrote:

Both the Old and the New Testaments give sufficient evidence of what a divinely wholesome thing it would be if pastors and Christian congregations might be visited by understanding and competent persons. For we read in Acts 9[:32] that St. Peter travelled about in the land of the Jews. And in Acts 15[:2] we are told that St. Paul together with Barnabas revisited all those places where they had preached. All his epistles reveal his concern for all the congregations and pastors. He writes letters, he sends his disciples, he goes himself. So the apostles, according to Acts 8[:14], when they heard how the Word had been received in Samaria, sent Peter and John there. Also we read in the Old Testament how Samuel travelled around, now to Ramah [1 SAM. 7:17], now to Nob [1 SAM. 21:1], now to Gilgal [1 SAM. 10:8; 11:14; 13:8; 15:12] and other places, not out of delight for taking a walk but out of love and a


sense of duty in his ministry and because of the want and need of the people. Elijah [1 KINGS 17-21] and Elisha [2 KINGS 2-13] did the same, as we read in the books of Kings. More than any, Christ has done this kind of work on behalf of all, and on this account possessed no place on earth where he could lay His head or which he could call His own. This began even while he was in the womb, for he went with his mother over the hills to visit

St. John [LUKE 1:39].

Formerly, in the days of the ancient Fathers, the holy bishops diligently followed these examples and even yet much of this is found in the papal laws. For it was in this kind of activity that the bishops and archbishops had their origin — each one was obligated to a greater or lesser extent to visit and examine. For, actually, bishop means supervisor or visitor, and archbishop a supervisor

or visitor of bishops, to see to it that each parish pastor visits and watches over and supervises his people in regard to teaching and life. And the archbishop was to visit, watch over, and supervise the bishops as to their teaching. But in time this office became such a show of secular pomp when the bishops made themselves princes and lords, that the duty of supervision was turned over to a provost or vicar or dean. Then the provosts and deans and chapter heads became servile courtiers and left supervision to deputies who with their notices of summons plagued the people with their extortions and visited no one (LW 40:269-70).

The Synod vice-presidents and I have visited each of the 35 districts of the Synod. In fact, we are on the second round. The Synod Constitution mandates it. We've gone from simply showing up for district conventions to multi-day visits that include time with the district president and his wife, as well as, whenever possible, time with the boards of directors and circuit visitors. Luther based his visits on Acts 15:36: "And after some days Paul said to Barnabas, 'Let us return and visit the brothers in every city where we proclaimed the word of the Lord, and see how they are.'"



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I recall one pastor telling me
he'd received the first visit ever
in his 30-years plus ministry.
He couldn't say enough positive
about his circuit visitor .*

During these visits I share how the Synod is faring, listen and encourage. The visit is to “see how they are.” If you want to know what visitation looked like at the time of St. Paul, read his letters. They are in fact his “visitation” when he couldn’t be there in person. Paul’s letters contain admonition and encouragement to remain faithful. Paul straightens things out from time to time. District visitations are a great opportunity for the dear district leaders to ask questions and give helpful critique to us. After doing this some 50 times (and they continue), I cannot recall a negative experience. So often, whenever hearsay is involved or lack of knowledge (on both sides), it is wonderful to speak face-to-face and encourage each other.

We have noted a definite uptick in the visits of pastors and congregations by circuit visitors. I recall one pastor telling me he’d received the first visit ever in his 30-plus years of ministry. He couldn’t say enough positive about his circuit visitor (a guy he didn’t think he’d mesh well with), and he was honored that the circuit visitor would spend time asking how he was doing and encouraging him.

The circuit visitors are the unsung and unpaid heroes of the Synod in my book. Still, there is much work to be done. A brother came to me not long ago and lamented with genuine sorrow that in 34 years he’d never been visited by either a district president or a circuit visitor. A newer district president described to me what a blessing his new and rigorous program of visiting all the congregations of his district has been. Congregations have been surprised and delighted by the first such visit they can recall.

These visits are essential for our life together. Yes, we have divisions. But it has been my consistent experience that when we actually sit down and talk to one another, we can carefully identify the issues that rub, and then begin to work on them — all the while finding that our areas of disagreement are fewer than we had thought. We must hold each other accountable to our commitments to be Lutheran, follow the Synod’s Constitution and reach the lost for Christ.

Dear Lord! Grant us the diligence to visit! Grant us greater peace and harmony as a church! Grant us a salutary and Gospel-centered “life together!”

That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life — the

life was made manifest, and we have seen it, and testify to it and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was made manifest to us — that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. *And we are writing these things so that our joy may be complete* (1 JOHN 1:1-4).

Joyful Giving in the Synod: Debt Reduced 42%

The point is this: whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. Each one must give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that having all sufficiency in all things at all times, you may abound in every good work
(2 COR. 9:6-8).

The Synod is a large entity. The national church (LCMS, Inc.) alone has a budget of \$75 to \$90 million a year, depending on the timing of Synod conventions and youth gatherings. The greatest portion is spent on international missionaries and their important work.

The financials are complex and, unfortunately, not always easy to understand. We do need greater clarity and transparency in this area, and we’re working on that. Our reporting has been too complex and confusing, and this does not contribute to joyful giving.

The dollars from your pocket to the offering plate to the district to the Synod (called “unrestricted funds”) support the basic operations of the church — from reconciliation efforts, to the Commission on Theology and Church Relations and much more. These dollars have been declining for 45 years. The challenge is constant.

Funds specifically designated by donors (called “restricted funds”) come from individuals, mission societies and districts, and they support many different ministries which exist by Synod Bylaw — including seminaries, which raise the vast majority of their funds from individual donors.

The bottom-line state of Synod finances can best be illustrated by two sets of numbers. When I began my service as Synod president in September 2010, the Synod was in a state of internal borrowing to the amount of \$16.1 million. The current number (January 2018) is \$10.3 million. This is not where I wanted to be at this point, but it’s definitely gone in



the right direction. In addition, the Synod's Board of Directors has taken prudent action toward the eventual elimination of internal borrowing. And, I might add, designated gifts are always directed where intended. I know of no instance where such gifts have not been expended where intended or needed.

A second set of numbers is the "Historic CUS Debt." This is indebtedness that the Synod took on from our universities several decades ago and has been paying off ever since. In the fall of 2010 the historic CUS (Concordia University System) debt was just under \$22 million. Today, that debt is roughly \$11.3 million.

If you combine the two sets of numbers showing Synod's indebtedness — the amount borrowed internally, plus the amount of the historic CUS debt — *during the past eight years, we have reduced Synod indebtedness from \$37,436,093 to \$21,659,958 — slightly more than a 42% reduction!*

The bottom line is, like so many of our congregations, Synod must do more with less. And in some cases, we must stop doing some things, even though we may have done them for a very long time. And yet, there is an enormous amount of "joyful" giving in the Synod. I see these blessings daily.

Question:
Is the LCMS having international impact?

Answer: Yes. In fact, we are experiencing the most cause for rejoicing in our 175-year history.

As I have noted often, this is the LCMS' international moment. The formally Lutheran state churches of Germany and Scandinavia have climbed aboard the bandwagon of redefined sexual norms. We in the U.S. are well aware of the sexuality decisions of the ELCA.

The Lutheran World Federation (LWF), founded in 1947, is an organization comprised of the majority of the Lutheran Church bodies of the world. While the LCMS has always opposed membership officially, there have been times in the 1960s and 70s, and even more recently, when LCMS missionaries and theologians encouraged our partner churches to join the LWF.

The LWF was founded upon confessional compromise, allowing from the beginning church bodies that did not clearly confess Lutheran teaching. For decades, the LWF has been coercing churches in the global South to accept the ordination of women — withholding funds from their seminaries, for instance, unless

they advance the LWF's politically correct course.

Today the LWF is working hard on hermeneutics projects designed to "educate" Lutherans, particularly in Africa and the global South, that the Bible must be interpreted "contextually." This means, essentially, that Europeans and Americans may interpret the Scriptures to allow homosexual marriage within their contexts, while the Africans may choose to interpret the Bible to forbid homosexual marriage within their context. Fortunately, the Africans are wise to this ruse and are not falling for a wax-nosed Bible.

The largest Lutheran church bodies in the world are increasingly seeking assistance from the LCMS. What do they want? It's not primarily money, but rather solid, biblical teaching and resources.

Are they serious? Yes, indeed. The Ethiopian Church (Mekane Yesus), which is approaching a membership of some 9 million, solemnly broke fellowship with its mother churches (the ELCA and the Church of Sweden) over the sexuality issues. They are strengthening their Lutheran identity, and we have been assisting them as much as possible. Both LCMS seminaries have been providing instructors for the Ethiopian graduate seminary, which trains teachers for six regional institutions. The General President of the Mekane Yesus told me face to face in January that they wish to commence formal fellowship talks. There are real obstacles, but we'd be derelict not to engage in those conversations.

African churches are threatened by "spiritism" (the notion that one can manipulate God and the spirits to provide temporal and eternal benefits) and "prosperity theology." They desire our assistance in clarifying the glorious preaching of the Gospel and administration of the Sacraments. They want to be Lutheran. It's not a one-way street, either. We need their joy and zeal for outreach, and their courage for preaching the Gospel, often in the face of mortal danger, such as in Muslim areas!

The Lutheran Church in Tanzania is approaching 7 million members. Our contacts are increasing daily. We've just put together a memorandum of understanding. Again, these African Lutherans want what the Ethiopians want: Lutheranism. They have contracted with CPH to provide *The Lutheran Study Bible* notes in Swahili to potentially reach millions!

In Madagascar, the Malagasy Lutheran Church numbers some 4 million members. We are moving toward fellowship talks soon. The president of that body is a Fort Wayne seminary graduate. They are a genuine confessional Lutheran Church, and I expect that we will be able to enter church fellowship with them in the not-too-distant future.

I could mention 30 other new, old or emerging Lutheran churches around the world where conversations have occurred. We currently enjoy some form of relationship with 79 Lutheran church bodies worldwide, representing 40 million Christians. Our LCMS Church Relations Director, the Rev. Dr. Albert Collver, also serves as the executive director of the

International Lutheran Council (ILC), the body of confessionally minded churches around the world in fellowship or association with the LCMS. Dr. Collver has been tending to these emerging relationships. Something exciting happens virtually every week. It is critical for the ILC to continue to increase its capacity as a viable alternative to the LWF, which has lost the conviction of the Bible's

inspiration and inerrancy and the binding character of the *Book of Concord*.

With our assistance, Lutherans around the world are sharpening the preaching of the Gospel. They are improving seminary education for future pastors and training young women to provide meaningful service to the Church as deaconesses.

As we assist our many new friends globally, we have doors opening domestically. Connections in Sudan, Ethiopia or Tanzania immediately bring access to immigrant communities in the U.S. and vice versa! It's a wonderful time to be Lutheran!

Through the Global Seminary Initiative (GSI), we have been able to partner with both LCMS seminaries to send professors overseas and to bring dozens of future leaders to St. Louis and Fort Wayne for study. These men (and sometimes women as deaconess students) are having life-changing experiences. They return home and have tremendous influence in strengthening the resolve of their compatriots. Thanks be to God!

They are an inspiration to us. They pray for us. They are a joy.

+

*The largest Lutheran church
bodies of the world are
increasingly seeking assistance
from the LCMS. What do
they want? It's not primarily
money, but rather solid, biblical
teaching and resources.*



Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up (GAL. 6:9).

We ought always to thank God for you, brothers and sisters, and rightly so, because your faith is growing more and more, and the love all of you have for one another is increasing (2 THESS. 1:3).

Despite our many imperfections and, at times, ridiculous conflicts and long-standing struggles in the LCMS, the world is looking to us. We must continue to get our act together, agree with each other, correct what is awry, grant freedom where freedom is due, and love one another. It's mission critical that we do so.

*The path to repentance, forgiveness, worship,
prayer, blessing, service, and joy
runs through the Scriptures and the Confessions!*

International Missionaries

*And how can anyone preach unless they are sent? As it is written:
"How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!"*
(ROM. 10:15).

Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles, and let all the peoples extol him
(ROM. 15:11).

Just a quick word. It was difficult to double the number of missionaries from some 65 to 130, as the Convention decided, but the Synod has responded. *A record 1,700 congregations support our international missionaries.* Missionary support today is as high as we've seen it in a number of years. Having missionaries create their own support base is not ideal. Some are not wired to do it. We provide training and assistance. We've gotten better at it. We've learned what to avoid. I wish it need not be done this way, but people like to support someone they feel they know. And we've found that during economic downturns, this model provides more consistent support.

And we have made tremendous strides. Eight years ago, there were only one or maybe two pastors on the field in Central and South America. Now we have many missionary pastors, deaconesses and laypeople. Our programs are currently training 100 deaconesses across the region. We have vastly increased the number of Spanish-speaking pastors via the Argentinian seminary and our new seminary in the Dominican Republic. The motto of our mission in the region is “Preach the Word. Plant Churches. Show Mercy.”

The recent hurricane in Puerto Rico has given us the opportunity to show mercy to thousands, while also adding a number of missionaries there!

In Eurasia, we continue to assist our German partner church in evangelizing Muslim refugees, with amazing results. We are working in Moldavia. We have started the first Lutheran Church in Romania. We are conducting seminars in Silesia. There is a new opportunity opening in Izmir, Turkey (ancient Smyrna).

In East Africa, we continue to care for hundreds of orphans, providing education, Luther’s Small Catechism and physical care. We now have kids who have been blessed by this care graduating from college! We continue refugee ministry in Kenya and have a congregation solely made up of refugees numbering 440! Congregations continue to sprout in the camps. A new seminary in Uganda has its first two cohorts of 38 students. In Mozambique, the Lutheran church is spreading. The locals are building church after church with their meagre resources. We provide the tin roofs!

In West Africa, the church needs pastors. French-speaking African countries are the most rapidly growing people group in Africa. The struggle with Islam is intense and dangerous for our missionaries and local Lutherans. We are assisting the building of elementary schools because Lutheran kids are being caned for confessing Christ in their current school. Despite various challenges, we continue work in several countries, sending Medical Mercy Teams to care for thousands facing death from easily treated diseases.

In Asia, we are re-focusing. We are working hard to increase the Lutheran identity and the proclamation of Jesus at three international schools. The regional



It was difficult to double the number of missionaries from some 65 to 130, as the Convention decided, but the Synod has responded. A record 1700 congregations support our international missionaries.

headquarters is moving to a tremendous building in Taiwan, a facility provided at no cost. The project to put Luther’s works into Chinese is leaping forward. We have a missionary seminary professor in the Philippines for the first time in 20 years. The Indonesian Lutheran Church (GKLI) is making positive strides with our assistance. In fact, they are now sending workers to evangelize in Banda Aceh, a heavily Muslim community. We are helping

them also reach out to an extremely poor people group in Sumatra, the Sanak People.

The most challenging part of the mission budget, year after year, is obtaining the needed funding for these vital, Gospel-sharing programs.

It’s a *joyous* moment for our international mission work! As we proclaim Christ, plant churches and assist our friends all over the world, the joy is ours!

“May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope” (ROM. 15:13).

Question: Can we make progress on outstanding and long-term areas of disagreement?

Answer: Yes. The Koinonia Project

“Complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind”

(PHIL. 2:2).

There is perhaps no more joy-killing reality in the Synod than persisting theological differences among us. We’ve made progress but have a long way to go.

The Koinonia Project is an effort designed to help us resolve theological and spiritual issues among us through fraternal discussion framed by the Word of God and prayer. The biblical concepts involved are outlined in the “Koinonia Project Concept Paper.”³⁵ Where the Koinonia process has been seriously followed, it has resulted in greater understanding of one another and often has led to greater agreement under the Word of God. Examples include:

- The Minnesota South District, over the course of five years, went through two rounds of discussions that led to greater agreement in their midst with a “Statement of Concord.”³⁶

- The Nebraska District, Northern Illinois District and South Wisconsin District, among others, developed Koinonia discussion groups of pastors seeking greater agreement under the Word of God.
- The Wyoming and Atlantic districts held two joint pastoral conferences and continue discussions about issues facing the Synod.
- Circuits in various districts have developed their circuit Winkel meetings as safe places for theological discussion, including the Texas, Kansas, Ohio, Southeastern, Minnesota North districts.
- Circuit visitors in several districts were trained in the process — including the North Dakota, Mid-South, Oklahoma, North and South Wisconsin districts — to help their circuits be places for fruitful theological discussion.
- For several years the Council of Presidents has made ongoing Koinonia discussions a part of nearly every meeting.
- Other presentations have been given in various venues around the Synod.

The process works best when begun with a two-day retreat during which the participants both study the Scriptures around “koinonia” and engage in activities that live out the attitudes and concepts developed from the Scripture study. Again, where people have seriously engaged in the process, the results have almost always been positive. The 2016 convention placed the future of the project into the hands of the Synod Praesidium.

I am committed, together with the whole Praesidium, to utilizing this process wherever we have opportunity. We can do more, both within the Council of Presidents and within our districts, to follow the examples we’ve outlined here. May God grant it, that together we “say the same thing” and that there be “no divisions” among us (1 COR. 1:10). I’ve added two resolutions on the challenging issues of worship and Communion practice as appendices to this paper. Each was passed by nearly 85% at the last Synod Convention.

Conclusion

It is a privilege and great joy to be part of the LCMS! To be chosen to lead this church body is the honor of a lifetime. Conducting visitations all over the country, on the international mission field, and visiting partner churches, new friends and dialogue

partners (WELS, NALC, NAAC and others) provides a perspective of our collective blessings, which is frankly overwhelming. I can hardly count all the marvelous and dedicated people I’ve met who love Jesus and our beloved Synod.

Like every one of you, I have my days. There are many challenges. There are weighty issues that I have not addressed in this paper. By the time many of them come to my desk, they are nearly intractable.

I often think of St. Paul and thank God for the record of challenges he has left us in his letters. After listing a plethora of challenges, the great apostle noted, “And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches” (2 COR. 11:28). From president to pastor to lay leader, we all feel this. And yet, Paul demonstrates a divinely wrought and hopeful joy through it all. What an unfathomable gift of God!

Paul’s words to the Thessalonians, who were beset with all sorts of trials so long ago, remain golden for us today and truer than ever. These words are my prayer for all of us.

We ask you, brothers, to respect those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, and to esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Be at peace among yourselves. And we urge you, brothers, admonish the idle, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with them all. See that no one repays anyone evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to everyone. Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise prophecies, but test everything; hold fast what is good. Abstain from every form of evil.

Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it.

Brothers, pray for us (1 THESS. 5:12–25).

O Lord, grant us repentance where we fall short. Forgive us our many sins. Help us to “rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances.” For this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for us. O Lord, by Your grace, makes us ever more each day “Joy:fully Lutheran”. In Jesus’ most precious name. Amen.

Abbreviations

AC	Augsburg Confession
Ap	Apology of the Augsburg Confession
FC Ep	Epitome of the Formula of Concord
FC SD	Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration
LC	Large Catechism

LW	<i>Luther's Works</i> , American Edition
SA	Smalcald Articles
SC	Small Catechism
WA	Luthers Werke, Weimarer Ausgabe [Luther's writings in German and Latin]

Endnotes

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from the ESV[®] Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version[®]), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers.

² Unless noted, all quotations from the Confessions are from Paul T. McCain et al., ed., *Concordia: The Lutheran Confessions*, 2nd ed. (St. Louis: CPH, 2005).

³ See the words of admonition, warning and praise from the Apostle John to the churches in Asia Minor in Revelation 1–3.

⁴ “For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins ... we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all” (HEB. 10:4, 10).

⁵ Full clarity likely came to Luther exactly 500 years ago as I write this in March 2018. See Martin Brecht, *Martin Luther: His Road to Reformation 1483–1521* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1985), 221ff., “The Inner Turning Point—The Reformatory Discovery.”

⁶ Martin Luther, *Sermons of Martin Luther: The House Postils*, ed. Eugene F. A. Klug (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 1:117–18.

⁷ Luther, *Sermons of Martin Luther*, 1:218–21.

⁸ Luther does not use the word “sign” in the sense of a token of an absent body and blood of Christ, but rather the true body and blood in the sacrament are a testament of God’s grace toward me.

⁹ “Now we know that whatever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable to God” (ROM. 3:19). “The Law always accuses us. It always shows that God is angry” (Ap V 7).

¹⁰ This section quoting the Weimar Edition of Luther’s Works (WA) on the priesthood of the baptized comes from Hellmut Lieberg, *Amt und Ordination bei Luther und Melancthon* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1962), 50ff.

¹¹ The classic and still relevant treatise on Jesus’ attitude toward Holy Scripture is J. A. O. Preus, *It Is Written* (St. Louis: CPH, 1971).

¹² These observations are based upon “The Power of God’s Word,” in Robert D. Preus, *Doctrine Is Life: Essays on Scripture*, ed. by Klemet I. Preus (St. Louis: CPH, 2006), 99ff.

¹³ W. G. Morris, “Joy” in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, ed. Hawthorne, Martin and Reid (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 512.

¹⁴ Matthew C. Harrison, ed., *At Home in The House of My Fathers* (St. Louis: CPH, 2010), 714.

¹⁵ *Concordia Triglotta* (St. Louis: CPH, 1921).

¹⁶ “Christ’s kingdom allows us outwardly to use legitimate political ordinances of every nation in which we live, just as it allows us to use medicine or the art of building, or food, drink and air” (Ap XVI 54).

¹⁷ See the chart of district performance in Appendix IV.

¹⁸ See the studies at: blogs.lcms.org/2016/journal-of-lutheran-mission-december-2016. For a critique and response by Pastor Curtis, see: blogs.lcms.org/2017/synod-demographic-studies-offer-insight-despite-critiques

¹⁹ George Hawley, *Demography, Culture, and the Decline of America’s Christian Denominations* (Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books, 2017).

²⁰ Hawley, *Demography*, 171.

²¹ Richard Bakalar, “U.S. Fertility Rate Reaches a Record Low,” *New York Times* (July 3, 2017), [nytimes.com/2017/07/03/health/united-states-fertility-rate.html](https://www.nytimes.com/2017/07/03/health/united-states-fertility-rate.html).

²² Ryan C. MacPherson, “Generational Generosity: Handing Down Our Faith to Our Children and Our Children’s Children,” *Journal for Lutheran Mission* (December 2016): 87, notes: “One factor has overpowered all other factors in the Synod’s numerical decline: a plummeting birth rate during the 1960s, which never rebounded but instead fell further during the 1990s.”

- The birth rate peaked in 1956 at 4% (four births per 100 baptized members).
- In the 1970s and the 1980s, the birth rate averaged about 2%.
- Today, the birth rate is scarcely higher than 1%.

²³ “Conversion” here is used for all who joined the LCMS whether new Christians or converts from other denominations. LCMS statistical reports have not distinguished between new converts to Christianity and converts to the LCMS from other denominations. We would do well to request this data in future congregational reporting.

²⁴ Here I suggest readers review the explanation to the Sixth Commandment in the new *Luther’s Small Catechism with Explanation* (St. Louis: CPH, 2017). There are a number of thoughtful texts and features.

²⁵ Data provided by LCMS Research Services.

²⁶ “Non-denominational” churches appear to be doing okay. However, all non-denoms together are still smaller than the Southern Baptist Convention, and they have a terrible retention rate of adults (just 43%).

²⁷ Visit: cph.org/p-31879-every-one-his-witness-kit.aspx.

²⁸ Check it out at: lcms.org/church-revitalization.

²⁹ Visit: lcef.org/demographics.

³⁰ Email from George Hawley, January 21, 2018.

³¹ “The Synod Has No Power but the Word of God,” in *At Home in the House of My Fathers*, 1.

³² From “A Study of the LCMS’s Fifty Largest Congregations,” LCMS Rosters and Statistics, January 2018.

³³ See the LCMS’s “Preach the Word” initiative. lcms.org/about/leadership/president/preach-the-word.

³⁴ C. F. W. Walther, *American-Lutheran Pastoral Theology*, ed. David W. Loy and Christian C. Tiews (St. Louis: CPH, 2017), 88.

³⁵ See lcms.org/about/leadership/president/koinonia-project.

³⁶ See mnsdistrict.org/engaged-in-mission/a-statement-of-concord.

Appendix I

Regarding Our Colleges and Universities

The blessings that the Synod receives from its schools of higher learning are many and enormous. The schools are negotiating the most challenging environment for higher education in recent history. Numerous studies indicate that scores of smaller universities and colleges will close over the next decade. Church worker numbers are down at our schools, but proportionally to the reality that today we have some 47% of the number of youth we had in 1980. There are strong theological faculties at Concordia Wisconsin, Concordia Chicago and Concordia Irvine. Seward produces a tremendous number of teachers and commissioned ministers for the Church. Irvine integrates theology throughout the curriculum. There are many positives at all the schools, and I don't have space to list them all here.

The regents of Concordia Selma, the only Lutheran Historically Black College (HBC), announced recently that this will be that institution's last academic year. Despite heroic efforts to turn the school in a positive financial direction, despite generous gifts and an ambitious plan that increased the campus property, all efforts were insufficient. The regents had hoped to find a buyer for the school up to the last minute before closure was finally announced.

As soon as I was elected President of the Synod, the crisis of Concordia Ann Arbor began to deepen. The school was seriously in the red. At the first Concordia University System Board meeting I attended, that board voted to close the school. (This board's vote alone was insufficient for closure according to Synod bylaws). I had heard the rumor several times that the Rev. Dr. Pat Ferry, President of Concordia University Wisconsin, Mequon, Wis. (the Synod institution with the greatest capacity) had been approached about looking into some sort of arrangement which might bring life to Ann Arbor, but to no avail. Soon I called Dr. Ferry myself and asked him the question: Have you and CUW's Board been asked to evaluate a possible amalgamation of Ann Arbor? His response: No, but we would be happy and honored to investigate the possibilities.

With a great deal of assistance from the Michigan District Church Extension Fund, the Synod (biting off several million dollars of the debt of the school and thus

adding several millions to the historic CUS debt), and others it happened. The market was there. Sustainable enrolment was possible. It could be financially viable. As I understand it, Concordia Ann Arbor (owned and operated by CUW) is just now coming into profitability.

As the Selma challenge accelerated, the CUS Board and the Synod's Board of Directors wrestled meeting after meeting with the issues faced. Over the last 10 years some 45% of all funds from St. Louis to the Concordia University System schools has gone to Selma. Several of our schools assisted Selma in various ways, even as the staff and board of regents there struggled mightily to turn the financial corner.

At a point of deep concern, I meet with the Rev. Dr. Dean Wenthe, president of the Concordia University System, and with the college and university presidents. "Can Selma be viable?" was my question. President Tom Ries of Concordia University, Saint Paul, who has extensive financial capabilities, led a team that visited Concordia Selma. The team reported to the LCMS Board of Directors that the school could not be viable. There were several reasons. Many of the students come from very challenging socio-economic situations (what a blessing and mission to serve this population for so long!). Only about 10% of the students graduate within a period of six years. Many withdraw from school for hardships. The market of Selma is not sufficient to support a student body large enough to make the school viable. A competing community college in Selma makes matters even more challenging. We requested that Concordia Austin also evaluate what might be possible, and the report was the same.

Concordia Selma could not continue to operate without millions of dollars in subsidy. If those millions were to come from St. Louis (and millions did come from St. Louis over the years), they would have to be added to the indebtedness of the LCMS.

With the school graduating only a few church workers and few if any pre-seminary students for a decade, we know that we must continue to seek student diversity on our other Concordia campuses (and they have become increasingly so). We can and will provide robust support for African American students seeking



church work degrees at all of our schools.

We're all sad. The Black Clergy Caucus has a right to be frustrated. The school (like a growing number of other HBCs) and the church simply ran out of options. Thanks be to God for the legacy of Rosa Young's vision for Lutheran education!

I'll just make a very brief statement on a challenging situation which continues at Concordia University, Portland, Ore. After I wrote a letter expressing deep concern about a pro-homosexual organization registered on campus, the regents voted unanimously to end the charter of all student organizations, with the intent of re-chartering them one by one. When the gay advocacy group (The Queer Straight Alliance) was negotiating with the school, and the school was insistent upon language which did not violate the public confession of the LCMS, the advocacy group went public. The administration believed that the several hundred internships provided to its education majors in the Portland schools were severely threatened. It was believed that this could close the university. Our school is essentially being held hostage. I don't wish to say much more.

But be assured, the LCMS Constitution is clear and applies to *all* of our schools. The Bible and the Lutheran Confessions are our supreme authority. If an institution is unable or unwilling to operate under that authority,

then the options are few and clear. Join me in praying for all involved, including the school, and for all of us seeking resolution.

The future of the universities will be challenging. But there will be blessings. Dr. Nunes has given Concordia College—New York, Bronxville, N.Y. a reinvigoration of churchly vision. Dr. Gard has brought a joyous and management-by-walking-around mentality to Chicago. Dr. Ries has brought financial stability to Saint Paul. Dr. Krueger has done the same at Irvine. Dr. Friedrich has, by God's grace, made many additions to the fabulous campus in Seward.

The future may bring more amalgamations like that of Ann Arbor into Mequon, and certainly greater cooperation and collaboration to maximize the Concordia brand. We must have outstanding theologically trained leadership at these institutions. Anything less will cripple the institution's ability to discern the importance of not bowing to the culture regarding biblical norms and the Christian life. It is only a robust, Lutheran theology that will equip our young people to bear witness in the face of an antagonistic culture. Such a vital and vigorous Lutheran theology is the prime tool to see that *every student* who attends a Concordia is confronted with the truth of Jesus Christ, Savior of the world.

Appendix II

2016 RESOLUTION 5-15 To Address Questions re the Sacrament of the Altar

WHEREAS, The Scriptures teach that the Lord Jesus gave His disciples His body to eat and His blood to drink under the bread and wine (Matt. 26:26–29; Mark 14:22–25; Luke 22:15–20; 1 Cor. 11:23–26); and

WHEREAS, In the Sacrament of the Altar, there is both a “vertical” and “horizontal” dimension, since we receive in the bread and wine Christ’s bodily presence and the forgiveness of sins He has won (vertical dimension) all the while partaking of one bread and cup together corporately in a way that affirms our unity with our fellow communicants (horizontal dimension; see Paul’s concerns about the Church’s Communion practices in 1 Cor. 10 and 11); and

WHEREAS, The Lutheran Confessions emphasize (1) that the true body and blood of Christ are truly (substantially) present, distributed, and received in the Church’s Communion (AC X; Ap X; SA III VI 1–4; SC Sacrament of the Altar 1; LC 5 1–19; FC SD VII 44); (2) that as we all receive one bread, we are therefore one body (Ap X 3); (3) that the Lord’s Supper conveys the forgiveness of sins (SC Sacrament of the Altar 6; LC 5 20–32; AC XXIV 7); (4) that all who commune receive the body and blood of Christ; (5) that only those who receive it in faith receive its forgiveness while those who do not receive it in faith do so to their spiritual harm (FC Ep and SD VII); and (6) that the Lord’s Supper strengthens faith (Ap IV 210); and

WHEREAS, The right practice of the Lord’s Supper flows from such scriptural and confessional teaching; and

WHEREAS, The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS) firmly holds these biblical and confessional teachings and has endorsed them numerous times not only through biblical and confessional subscription, but also in other formal ways, such as by adopting the Brief Statement (§ 21) and numerous convention resolutions regarding Communion practice (1983 Res. 3-12; 1986 Res. 3-08; 1989 Res. 3-10; 1995 Res. 3-08; 1998 Res. 3-05; 1998 Res. 3-16B; 2001 Res. 3-16); and

WHEREAS, Questions and concerns continue to be raised about the Synod’s practice of closed Communion; and

WHEREAS, Questions and concerns have been raised about the propriety and practice of communing infants and very young children; and

WHEREAS, Questions and concerns have been raised about the propriety and practice of intinction; and

WHEREAS, The Commission on Theology and Church Relations (CTCR) has also addressed the doctrine and practice of the Lord’s Supper, both in general terms and by addressing specific questions, in numerous reports and opinions, such as *Theology and Practice of the Lord’s Supper* (1983); *A Model Communion Card Statement* (1993); *Response to “Concerns of the South Wisconsin District Circuits 18 and 19 Regarding Infant Communion”* (1997); *Admission to the Lord’s Supper: Basics of Biblical and Confessional Teaching* (1999); *Knowing What We Seek and Why We Come: Questions and Answers Concerning the Communion of Infants and Young Children* (2014); *Guidelines for Congregational, District, and Synodical Communion Statements* (2014); therefore be it

Resolved, That the LCMS reaffirm that its statements and resolutions with regard to closed Communion, as noted above (see fifth whereas paragraph), are faithful to Scripture and the Confessions; and be it further

Resolved, That the LCMS continue “To Encourage Proper Oversight in Administration of [the] Lord’s Supper by Visitation from Ecclesiastical Supervisors” (2013 Res. 4-10); and be it further

Resolved, That the LCMS affirm that participation in the Lord’s Supper by infants and very young children (as well as adults!) should be postponed until they are baptized and instructed, so that they may properly examine themselves and “know what they seek and why they come” (Large Catechism V 2); and be it further

Resolved, That in the matter of infant and toddler Communion, the LCMS commend for study and



guidance the CTCR report *Knowing What We Seek and Why We Come: Questions and Answers Concerning the Communion of Infants and Young Children* (2014); and be it further

Resolved, That in the matter of guidance for Communion cards and statements and continued faithful and loving pastoral practice, the LCMS commend for study and discussion the CTCR report *Guidelines for*

Congregational, District, and Synodical Communion Statements (2014); and be it finally

Resolved, That the LCMS encourage the CTCR to complete its work on a study document on intinction for use by the Council of Presidents as it discusses this issue.

ADOPTED: Yes: 821 (83%); No: 167 (17%).

Appendix III

2016 RESOLUTION 4-04A

To Appeal to the LCMS Congregations, Workers, and Institutions within Christian Freedom and for Love's Sake to Retain a Common Order of Service for the Lord's Supper

WHEREAS, The Lutheran Church has long heeded the Apostle's injunction that all things be done decently and in order (1 Cor. 14) by joyfully and freely receiving the Church's historic order of Divine Service (service of Holy Communion) as a precious gift from previous generations of Christians by which the Word of God is not bound but given free course that it may be proclaimed to the joy and edifying of Christ's holy people; and

WHEREAS, The Lutheran Church confesses that it suffices for the true unity of the Christian Church that the Gospel be preached in conformity with a pure understanding of it and the sacraments administered in accordance with the divine Word (see AC VII 2); and

WHEREAS, It is simply not necessary for the true unity of the Christian Church that ceremonies instituted by human custom should be observed uniformly in all places (see AC VII 3); and

WHEREAS, The Lutheran reformers nevertheless protested ardently that they had by no means allowed the Mass, that is, the Divine Service (service of Holy Communion), to be abolished, but rather observed it with the customary ceremonies with even greater reverence than their opponents (see AC XXIV 1 and Ap XXIV 1); and

WHEREAS, The Lutheran reformers could insist that those church usages that have been established by human authority ought to be observed, provided they could be observed without sin and without the erroneous opinion that they justified (see AC XV) for the sake of training the unlearned in the faith (see AC XXIV 3); and

WHEREAS, The reformers rejected the notion that humanly instituted ceremonies are in and of themselves divine worship or a part of it (see FC Ep X 3); and

WHEREAS, The Lutheran reformers confessed that the churches of God in every locality and age have authority to order such ceremonies in ways that are fitting and profitable for the building up of the community in the faith (FC Ep X 4); and

WHEREAS, All frivolity and offense are to be carefully avoided in this regard so that the weak in faith are not scandalized (FC Ep X 5); and

WHEREAS, That no church should condemn another because one has less or more external ceremonies not commanded by God (FC Ep X 7 and Negative Theses); and

WHEREAS, The reformers also authored church orders, such as the *Church Order for Braunschweig-Wolfenbüttel*, recently published in English by CPH (2015), which show how evangelical freedom may fruitfully be joined with a grateful reception and creative appropriation of the Church's living liturgical and hymnological heritage; and

WHEREAS, The church orders evidenced variation in the details of the humanly established ceremonies from place to place, yet all within the order received from previous generations; and

WHEREAS, This received order provides in a remarkable way for the whole counsel of God to be set before the congregation in a weekly and yearly pattern that delivers the riches of Christ to His Bride, balancing both what changes weekly or seasonally (the "Propers") with the stability of a framework that remains largely constant (the "Ordinary"); and

WHEREAS, The LCMS Constitution Art. III 7 states, "The Synod, under Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions shall — ... Encourage congregations to strive for uniformity in church practice, but also to develop an appreciation of a variety of responsible practices and customs which are in harmony with our common confession of faith"; therefore be it

Resolved, That the LCMS in convention appeal to the congregations of the Synod for love's sake (PHILEMON 9), when celebrating the Lord's Supper, to regularly use these basic components of the Order of Service (*Ordo*): to gather in the triune name, confess our sins and receive Absolution, praise the blessed Trinity, attend to the reading and the proclamation of God's Holy Word, confess our faith using the historic creeds, offer prayers



for all people according to their needs including praying the Lord's Prayer, celebrate the Lord's Supper with Christ's own words, and then depart with God's blessing to send us forth as His forgiven children and witnesses to His grace; and be it further

Resolved, That the LCMS in convention appeal to the congregations of the Synod to rejoice in the freedom of instrumentation, style, and sequence within this basic framework; and be it further

Resolved, That the LCMS in convention appeal to the congregations of the Synod to remember and consider for use the richness of the biblical canticles (for example, the *Kyrie*, *Gloria in Excelsis*, *Sanctus*, *Agnus Dei*, and *Nunc Dimittis*); and be it further

Resolved, That the LCMS in convention appeal to the congregations of the Synod to reaffirm Synod's Constitution Art. VI 4, in which we willingly agree to the "exclusive use of doctrinally pure agenda, hymnbooks, and catechisms in church and school" in all worship services; and be it further

Resolved, That the LCMS in convention appeal to the pastors and other worship leaders of the Synod to make a rich and full use of the Church's liturgies, "psalms and

hymns and spiritual songs" (Col. 3:16); and be it further

Resolved, That the LCMS in convention appeal to the educational institutions of the Synod to educate and form students in the riches of the Church's liturgies, "psalms and hymns and spiritual songs" (Col. 3:16); and be it further

Resolved, That the LCMS in convention appeal to our congregations and workers to welcome and encourage the development and use of new hymns, spiritual songs, and liturgical settings which continually are called forth by the Holy Spirit, not as a supplanting to what has come before, but as a supplement to it, its living growth; and be it finally

Resolved, That the LCMS in convention appeal to the circuits and districts of the Synod and the Council of Presidents to engage in full and open discussion in the next triennium of how this spirit of unity and freedom is put into practice in our walk together, and that the District Presidents would encourage the implementation of the spirit of unity and freedom expressed in this resolution and report back to the 2019 convention.

ADOPTED: Yes: 795 (84%); No: 146 (16%).

Appendix IV

Summary of 10 Years of LCMS Statistics by District (2005-2015)

Baptized Membership

District	2015 Baptized Members	2005 Baptized Members	Baptized Change	Baptized Pct
Atlantic District	29,829	36,503	-6,674	-18%
California/Nevada/Hawaii District	38,175	51,703	-13,528	-26%
Central Illinois District	63,539	71,454	-7,915	-11%
Eastern District	37,342	49,539	-12,197	-25%
English District	46,961	58,902	-11,941	-20%
Florida-Georgia District	52,151	68,337	-16,186	-24%
Indiana District	101,360	113,377	-12,017	-11%
Iowa East District	39,143	46,099	-6,956	-15%
Iowa West District	57,273	65,859	-8,586	-13%
Kansas District	54,814	62,428	-7,614	-12%
Michigan District	184,139	224,855	-40,716	-18%
Mid-South District	26,275	31,210	-4,935	-16%
Minnesota North District	53,085	64,714	-11,629	-18%
Minnesota South District	116,304	130,963	-14,659	-11%
Missouri District	129,279	139,800	-10,521	-8%
Montana District	13,398	15,066	-1,668	-11%
Nebraska District	103,539	108,753	-5,214	-5%
New England District	15,784	21,708	-5,924	-27%
New Jersey District	11,412	16,559	-5,147	-31%
North Dakota District	20,476	22,868	-2,392	-10%
North Wisconsin District	95,576	104,384	-8,808	-8%
Northern Illinois District	110,883	140,858	-29,975	-21%
Northwest District	53,538	73,962	-20,424	-28%
Ohio District	53,870	68,646	-14,776	-22%
Oklahoma District	19,351	22,858	-3,507	-15%
Pacific Southwest District	76,405	97,773	-21,368	-22%
Rocky Mountain District	46,441	57,665	-11,224	-19%
SELC District	15,651	17,239	-1,588	-9%
South Dakota District	30,010	31,342	-1,332	-4%
South Wisconsin District	99,909	124,284	-24,375	-20%
Southeastern District	61,531	70,534	-9,003	-13%
Southern District	25,042	34,603	-9,561	-28%
Southern Illinois District	38,022	43,921	-5,899	-13%
Texas District	128,053	137,321	-9,268	-7%
Wyoming District	11,562	14,777	-3,215	-22%
Synod Total	2,060,122	2,440,864	-380,742	-16%



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