DEAR BROTHERS AND SISTERS IN CHRIST,

As I travel around the country visiting our churches, schools, pastors, teachers and lay members and see the mighty work you do as you serve your communities and missions, I am thankful for the great heart for the Gospel — in Word and deed — that I witness among you.

Many people say this world is a troubled place — and surely we know Christ told us we would have troubles, but we also know He has overcome them (John 16:33). With joy, I see you "overcoming" those troubles in the faith you proclaim and act on every day in our Lutheran churches, from coast to coast — through jobs programs in Detroit, a health fair in Pensacola, a food pantry in New Orleans, a new Lutheran school start in Gary, housing for seniors in St. Louis, cross-cultural ministry in Omaha, working with foster children in Los Angeles. In all you do, you proclaim Christ, our Savior and Redeemer.

I am also encouraged to see young people being brought up in the faith. Who could look at the faces of the junior ushers at St. Paul Lutheran, Dallas, who start as young as 5 years old, and not be excited about the future of our church? Confirmation classes — so vital to growing an educated and committed church — give us hope for the future and great joy as we witness their confession of faith.

Looking back, we see God’s faithfulness to us through time. Congratulations to Mount Zion Lutheran Church in New Orleans as it celebrates 140 years of ministry this year, having passed through not one but TWO hurricanes.

Our brother Rev. James Tyler celebrates 65 years in ministry this year, which included nine years on the mission field in Nigeria as one of the first African-American Lutheran pastors to serve in Africa. Pastor Tyler overcame a nearly deadly illness, returned to Africa, then "retired," only to be called again to serve our Lord and Savior at Bethany Lutheran Church, Bakersfield.

How inspiring are these long-serving ministers of the Gospel who pass through storms, physical and spiritual, yet always keep their eyes on Jesus. Rev. Dr. Dien Ashley Taylor reminded us as he addressed our convocation last summer that “It’s All About Jesus.”

Yes, there is discouraging news across our country and in our church. The closing of Concordia College Alabama, Selma, Ala., the only Lutheran historic black college in the nation, founded in 1922 through the ministry of Dr. Rosa Young, is a heartbreaking loss. We are grateful for those who graduated and serve so generously and wisely in the Church, and we mourn those we will never reach by closing the doors on this ministry in one of the poorest states in our nation. Let us pray for new vision as we keep our eyes on Jesus.
REALIZING A DREAM FOR AFRICA

When James Tyler started college in 1947, he planned to become an aeronautical engineer. But God had other plans. In 1948, he heard a missionary from South America speak and discerned that God wanted him to be a missionary — to Africa. He had no idea it would take him 33 years to get there!

Tyler transferred to a Bible college, where he graduated in 1953, and married his high school sweetheart, Billie Pallard. But his dream of going to Africa as a missionary did not come true … yet.

Tyler soon met a pastor with The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod who helped him register to attend Concordia Theological Seminary in Springfield, Ill. He completed his degree and was ordained through the colloquia system in 1965 while serving at Berea Lutheran Church in New Orleans. In 1970, he was called to Good Shepherd Lutheran in Ft. Lauderdale as the first black pastor for the black congregation. Several years later, he answered a call to St. James Lutheran Church in Bakersfield, Calif. Finally, in 1981, his 33-year-old dream of becoming an African missionary came true. He was called to serve the Lutheran Church of Nigeria in Port Harcourt, one of the first American black pastors to serve with the church. During their nine years in Nigeria, Pastor Tyler, with his wife Billie’s help, started five churches, helping train pastors and lay leaders. He was not afraid to roll up his sleeves to dig trenches, pour foundations, haul cement via a wheelbarrow, build brick walls or help erect the support beams of these emerging church buildings! The Port Harcourt church, which was the largest of the five, was designed and built by the congregation — all unskilled workers. The Tylers used much of their own money to help sponsor and build these Nigerian Lutheran churches.

In 1987, Pastor Tyler became very ill. On June 24, he was treated for malaria and amoebae. He responded well and was able to work with much energy. He became very ill again on July 12 and was treated again for the same illness by another doctor. He grew worse, and doctors in the Lutheran Hospital in Nigeria decided that immediate surgery was necessary because all signs indicated appendicitis.

As the surgery proceeded, the doctors agreed they were looking at cancer: inoperable, fast-spreading malignant tumors, which had caused much damage to the colon. Tyler’s condition had now become critical. The only hope the doctors could give was that radiation treatment in the US and pain medication might ease his suffering. Pastor Tyler was brought home to the U.S. in July so ill that he had to travel with a doctor by stretcher and be met by an ambulance.

There was much grief and many prayers offered in Nigeria. The Lutheran Church of Nigeria’s President Rev. Nelson Unwene said, “Do not fret, stand still and see me work — I am your God; I have not brought you to this place to have your bones buried in a foreign land — my purpose will be accomplished — I will get glory and you will have my joy.”

Ten days later, after a second extensive operation at St. Jude’s Hospital in Fullerton, Calif., the doctors made the startling announcement that there was no cancer. They were not sure what caused the growth and damage. Perhaps amoebae?

Several months later, Rev. Tyler was well enough to return to Nigeria. On Palm Sunday, during the meeting of the Nigerian Lutheran Women’s National Rally, Rev. Unwene repeated the story of Jim’s illness and miraculous healing. More than a thousand people rose in a very mighty crescendo of praise, along with instruments and dance as the people presented their thanksgiving offerings to God because they had again witnessed the strength of their Almighty God, who hears and answers prayer.

The Tylers’ ministry in Nigeria ended in 1990 when they returned home to Bakersfield, Calif. He wrote on leaving: “To all of our friends, brothers and sisters here, we say, we love you. Our lives would have been incomplete without you. We will always keep you in our hearts. Please keep us in your prayers. God’s grace be with you.”

But his ministry was not done. In the fall of 1993, Bethany Lutheran Church called Pastor Tyler as its part-time minister. But the “part-time” designation didn’t mean much, because Pastor Tyler was a full-time minister in service to God and his flock. Today, at age 90, Pastor Tyler celebrates 65 years in ministry and continues to serve at Bethany, where he is much loved.
Mount Zion Lutheran Church, the oldest African-American Lutheran Church in New Orleans, has weathered two hurricanes, countless vacancies and a changing community, yet perseveres in its ministry to “carry forward with vigor and zeal with His blessed work of saving souls and defending the pure doctrine of His holy Word.”

Celebrating 140 years of service this spring, Mount Zion brought together 250 people, including nine pastors, to celebrate its ministry proclaiming the Word and sharing God’s mercy with the community. The service also honored Mount Zion’s oldest living member, Mrs. Dorothy Jones Lewis, 102. Mrs. Lewis was born in Shreveport on March 12, 1916, and was given a trip to New Orleans for her high school graduation. There she met the love of her life, Alphonse Lewis, and they were married in 1934. She joined him at Mount Zion, where he was a lifelong member.

The Rev. Gregory Manning of Broadmoor Community Church (Gloria Dei Lutheran) spoke on “Remember, Rejoice and Rededicate: Hard Times, Faithful God,” based on Proverbs 3:5–6. He talked of enduring in the service to God’s people and the vital mercy ministry of reaching beyond the church walls to bring the message of salvation to all.

Mount Zion got its start in the Old Sailor’s Home along the Mississippi riverfront on April 7, 1878. Begun by the Rev. John F. Doescher, known for his mission work among African-Americans in the South, Mount Zion opened its day school just nine months later with 120 students. The Rev. Nils Bakke — who would later help establish the Lutheran church in the Alabama Black Belt, working with Rosa J. Young — was Mount Zion’s second pastor, serving from 1889 to 1891. The Rev. Bakke was pastor and teacher and helped move Mount Zion from the riverfront to an old church building in the city. A number of pastors served the church over the years, some filling in during vacancies. One of the longest-serving pastors was the Rev. Victor Moritz, who served 40 years, from 1952 to 1992.

The church has also enjoyed strong lay leadership and teaching staff, which ran an active Sunday school and parochial school. Teacher Eugene Vix began teaching a year after Pastor Bakke arrived and served more than 36 years. His teaching colleague D. Meibohm served from 1893 to 1923. Teacher Miss Elsie Gilbert taught for 43 years, from 1924 to 1967. The school’s highest enrollment was 336 students in 1940 — when many children had been turned away because of lack of space.

Hurricane Betsy roared into the Big Easy in 1965 and destroyed Mount Zion Church and School. Despite the difficulty, Mount Zion continued operating its Christian day school until 1967, when it closed due to declining enrollment. The congregation built a new church, dedicated in 1969. The Rev. Limakatso Nare arrived at Mount Zion in 2002 and continues to shepherd the congregation.

In 2005, Mount Zion was hit by Hurricane Katrina. Volunteers from the LCMS Indiana District and other churches around the Synod helped with repairs, and the church reopened three months later. Today the Word is preached in word and deed by serving the homeless, hungry, hurting and all ages with meals, prayers, Vacation Bible School, gifts and a special Christmas celebration based on the nativity.
**BLACK MINISTRY IN THE LCMS**

The “FTL Series” Accompaniment CD — featuring 28 selections covering several seasons and occasions throughout the church calendar — was dedicated at First Timothy Lutheran Church in Indianapolis. Looking at the information on the display table in the church narthex are Veronica Henderson, James Boyd, Deborah Lewis, Geydyn Bowers and Audrey Bruno. The Accompaniment CD is a unique music resource project presented in the rich tradition of African-American and other cultural styles that embodies and elevates the heritage of Lutheran worship. Songs of praise and thanksgiving found in the vast repertoire of the Christian hymnody are transformed using elements of rhythm, timbre and improvisation to create a soulful union of music expressive of God’s Word and refreshing to the spirit. More information about the CD can be found at firsttimothylcms.org/ftlseries. Photo by Naomi Gee.

“For I was hungry, and you gave me food” (Matt. 25:35). Broadmoor Community Church has responded to the hungry and homeless in the community by placing a red food box in front of the church. “Those who are hungry are encouraged to take what they need; those who can give are encouraged to give back what they can,” said Pastor Gregory Manning, who plans to also provide free Bibles and church flyers. Located just a mile from a Salvation Army homeless shelter, the Lutheran church also runs a food pantry every week, a homeless day shelter and other mercy ministries. And the little red food box is usually emptied every day. Photo courtesy of Broadmoor Community Church.

Welcomed to the Lord’s Supper are newly confirmed members of Bethel Lutheran Church in New Orleans: Cydni Haynes, Summer Gould, Calaysia Brister, Cowana Brister, Blessing Sylvester, Terrell Gould and Calaysia Brister. Photo by Troy Stewart.

Concordia College Alabama celebrates its last graduation handing out nearly 100 two-year and four-year degrees before closing its doors on a 96-year history this June. The Board of Regents announced their decision to close the school in February. National Radio Host Tom Joyner was the featured speaker. Photo by Blake DeShazo, Selma Times Journal.

Building his church from the littlest on up, Pastor Byron Williams, Sr. has given learning and leadership roles to youth in his church, starting at age 5. His junior ushers assist in the service every fourth Sunday and on special occasions like Mother’s Day, Father’s Day and Easter. In the photo are Phil, Phil, Jamonce, Xavier, Noah, Danny, Kahlen, Desthawan, Deceone, Cornelius, Desthawan, Eric, Javion, Zion and Ian. Photo courtesy of St. Paul Lutheran Church, Dallas.

Celebrating their life in Christ through confirmation are youth at Incarnate Word Lutheran Church, Stone Mountain, Georgia. Rev. Dr. Wilton Eric Heyliger, front left, with Jonathan Hudson, Elliott Morgan, Grace Burkhammer, Madison Mitchell, Patrick Moore; Back row: Elder Neville Richard and newly baptized Justin Farrell. Photo courtesy of Incarnate Word Lutheran Church.

Children from Jehovah Lutheran Church, Pensacola - Rylie Payne, Derrick Abney and Richard Payne Jr. - participate in the Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., parade in downtown Pensacola. Photo by Pastor Ferry Nye.
ALL FOR JESUS — KNOWING HIM ACTS 1:9

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Greetings to the laypeople, commissioned rostered workers and brother clergy of Christ’s Holy Church.

With all the glory, honor and praise being given to our almighty and most merciful God — the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit — I am thankful to The Rev. Dr. Roosevelt Gray and to those who have honored me with the opportunity to address the 2017 Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod Lutherans in Black Ministry Family Convocation.

As the Pastor of Redeemer Evangelical Lutheran Church in the Bronx, New York — a parish of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod where “God’s People Pray,” — and as the First Vice-President of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod Atlantic District that is “Engaging the World with the Gospel of Hope,” the perspectives today are offered in prophetic urgency and priestly humility while both in deference to the collective wisdom and innumerable experiences exponentially assembled in this gathering and yet with a consciousness of our sinful need for repentance each day and the enormous stakes before us. These flesh-penetrating, nerve-severing, crucifying stakes include not only our earnest desire to celebrate as an escape from reality and as a defense mechanism to conceal our true states of mind but also the painful recognition of the struggle and demise of what we wish we could celebrate: namely, that behind the phony facades of “I’m doing great,” most of us are not and neither are our parishes, schools, and other ministries, even when we want to project otherwise. Fooling some of the people some of the time is hereby suspended during this holy time in these hallowed halls so that the emergency heart surgery can be done in order to give the patient patience, power and prayerful potential to pick up one’s mat and walk again, in the Name of Jesus Christ.

The images, then, are from my own parish in The Bronx, in the great City of New York as I hope that capturing a few images of a diverse parish in a global city will scintillate the imagination, inspire the forlorn and motivate us to live what we believe, teach and confess. If a picture is worth a thousand words, the image loop you see allows me to make the most of our time together.

“Redeemer Evangelical Lutheran Church, by God’s grace, is a praying community of service that receives, teaches, celebrates and shares Christ Jesus.” As this mission and vision statement is known and recited by our parishioners as we are gathered for worship, it exemplifies that “It’s still all about Jesus,” as our lives are lived “All for Jesus.” By the power and grace of the Holy Spirit, we are called to “Know Him.” As it is “All for Jesus — Know Him” this morning, the application of Lutheran Reformation theology and practice in the 21st century involves confessing Christ in our time and rejoicing that this implies the liberal expression of our dynamic conservatism as Western Christians, lest we Lutherans are lumped in with a religious right that is so often actually a religious wrong.

“To know, know, know Him” is not just to love, love Him but to be known by Him and to be loved by Him. We are Lutherans, so that means that we do not love Him in order for Him to love us and we do not know Him so that He may get to know us. We believe that we cannot by our own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ or come to Him, but the Holy Spirit calls, gathers, enlightens and sanctifies us and keeps us in the one true faith. “Know Him” only happens if we are known by Him first. It is “all for Jesus” when it is “all from Jesus.” It is Christ Jesus who initiates the salvation action in our lives, choosing to know us and choosing to love us.

And if we are to know Him and as He knows us, and as we are called to confess Him in our time, just, then who is He that we are to know?

Is He “so sweet and so mild” that He remains “a little child?”

Is He a philosophical concept relegated to the dusty pages of academia, reduced to lexical Greek declensions and Hebrew grammatical constructions?

Is He a law giver whose laws do not apply anymore in a post-Christian society, giving us Pharasaical freedom to condemn...
everything around us that we see “them” doing in the world while the log that protrudes from our own eyes is bedazzled with our own multi-colored hair weaves and gaudy and bogus bling?

Is He an unstained figure in a stained glass window, echoing the cultural background of one particularized people exclusively, the kind of Christ from the golden years of Sunday School curricula that ossifies one image of our Lord among Anglo people when not even White people look like the people in those Sunday School pictures?

Is He stuck behind a laptop computer as a religious administrator, Instagraming His latest miracle wonders from his smartphone, Snapchatting His latest Beatitudes conveniently stolen from better preachers, or pushing His Pinterest interests on the less-than-interested?

Is He a political guru, promising blissfully that we are “stronger together” as He leads a so-called religious right in making America great again?” Lord, have mercy on us all!

Is He a superhero, seeking to join Avengers in a Justice League as a great Transformer in a fight against all aliens in our midst?

Is He more fascinated with banning people’s travel to keep out the unwanted and unconverted, whether with wide walls paid for by the enemy we like to hate or with even higher communion rails erected and based on eligibility statements used to keep out the infidel and any others who might only want to wash His saving feet with their hair extensions and pour the perfume of their prayers at the throne of grace in a house that is supposed to be a House of Prayer for all people … but really only “our kind of people” who become just like us in every way?

Is He validating Bette Middler and just “watching us from a distance,” an absent-minded dead-beat dad-brother whose most notable quality is His disintegrated disinterest in our dour and dismal less-than didactic morality?

Is He just part of the great quasi-Hindu pantheon of do-gooders whose example is admirable but whose claims are not universal?

If it is “All for Jesus” and we are called to “Know Him,” let us be clear about Who He is.

Jesus is God, of the same substance of His Father, fully God and fully human. Our ancestors wrote it that way in the Nicene Creed.

Jesus is the child of unwed parents whose mother became impregnated in mysterious circumstances, born at an inconvenient time yet born in the fullness of time.

Jesus is the One born on a refugee immigration round-up registration trip and yet He was not welcomed or celebrated by the many family members who should have been there for his mother — a teenaged damsel in distress — joined by her ever-dreaming consort. Should not they have been offering them a space for his birth instead of wearing neon-colored pro-life caps at abortion clinics to make troubled people feel even worse about difficult decisions they feel impelled to make? Should not they have beaten their picket signs into ploughshares and offered their homes and their help to these young people who were far away from home, offering hospitality to the alien, stranger, and those who do life differently than they do because that is part and parcel of what being “pro-life” really means?

Jesus is the One visited by a bunch of thugs, nightlife-loving, endangered species males who defied the statistics by not being incarcerated but who probably wore hoodies — at least they are pictured that way in most religious art— who themselves risked being shot in those hoodies as they walked through the streets and neighborhoods of Bethlehem — sticking out like sore thumbs— to visit a brother from another mother yet born from their same Father as they were cognizant of how gated that community must have been when that same community relegated a pregnant girl and her consort to lay their newborn child in a cattle slop pot.

Jesus is the One who was worshipped by pagan astrologers whose horoscopes and philosophies directed them to recognize the salvation that had come to the world even when the Torah-reading, phylactery-wearing religious elite who should have known better did not.

Jesus is the One who was popular with Middle Eastern prostitutes who let their hair down in public with Him regularly. He is the One who brokered with Wall Street’s tax collectors, broke up failed fishing expeditions, kept the wine coming at parties and put mud in people’s eyes and got away with it … at least for a little while.

Jesus is the One who told stories using every day illustrations, fluent in Ebonics, while arguing with the so-called religious elite.

Jesus is a person of color and culture, born in Palestine, circumcised on the eighth day, attending “Tot-Shabbat,” wandering away from the youth group trip at twelve years of age in order to engage in meaningful conversation in a house that He claimed was His own, speaking Aramaic, knowing Hebrew and Greek with a fair amount of Latin under His belt, not to mention the language of love and mercy oozing down His kosher coat tails.

Jesus is a mover and a shaker … and a whipper, clearing out the temple’s mess and morass in order to restore true worship in His Father’s house, even if it meant doing it over His own dead body.

Jesus is the bigger man who kept His commitments and proved His manhood by actually showing up, putting up, standing up, hanging up, lifting up, and rising up so that the people He loves could enjoy treasures they never earned or deserved.

Jesus is the Suffering Servant — bench-pressing the sins of the world, whose chiseled pecs were not what made the women go gah-gah over Him as much as the revelation of His sacred heart muscle that pumped not only blood throughout His body 2000 years ago but that pumps His precious blood throughout His Body the Church even today.

That is because Jesus was not in urban ministry or rural ministry or millennial ministry or senior ministry or women’s ministry or campus ministry or Lutheran ministry or Native American ministry or Latino ministry or White ministry or Black...
ministry; He has been, He was, He is and He will be in plain “ministry.” He had no desire, inclination or intention of further compartmentalizing a humanity that had become far too mentalized, disintegrated, segregated, separated and severed already. Nobody sits in the back of His bus.

Jesus does not discriminate. He is liberal and generous, on the margins and in the trenches, turning things inside out and upside down — “Boy, You turn me inside out, round and round”—a mover and a shaker who cleared out the morbid morass, minutia and mess that had inconveniently cluttered His Father’s narthex that had prevented new people from breathing the fresh wind of His Spirit of peace, freedom, justice, truth and love. Out with the old, in with the new — so throw those ratty, old, sun-faded pamphlets stacked in your narthexes away!

Jesus is a radical reformer, and thank God He is. He is not afraid of challenging the status quo, of getting stoned to death, of being threatened by the establishment, of losing elections even when it may appear that they were stolen from Him, of being betrayed by friends, of being deserted by brothers, of being put down while He tried to lift other people up. He just did what His Daddy gave Him to do, sometimes with a tear streaming down His face, sometimes with sweat pouring down as droplets of blood, and sometimes with a glance that promised to reconcile and forgive those who abandoned Him on the beach.

Jesus is the One who died on a cross for us for our salvation to rescue us from the consequences of our sin and rose from the dead, defeating sin, death and the devil.

Jesus is our Savior. He is our Redeemer. He is our lover filled with everlasting love who continues His faithfulness to us. He is our Rock and our Salvation, the Hope of all the ends of the earth and of the farthest seas, our God in whom we trust. Jesus is the reason why we sing because His eye is on the sparrow. He is the jump in my step who picked me up and turned me around and set my feet on the solid ground. He is the Friend of Sinners, the peace who is often forfeited, the One who bore my needless pain, the Lily of the Valley and the lily in my valley, the way maker, the life-changer, the joy-giver, my dearest Treasure and the truest Friend to me.

Jesus ascended into heaven not to be far away from us but to be right here with us and He is coming back again to make all things new.

He is so “up above my head” that He is even deep, deep down in my heart. He is so “other-than” that He chooses to meet me in the waters of my perspiration and tears and drown me there so that I may rise victoriously in Him from His font of new life. He is so

Jesus calls me to faith in Him. He calls me to His life. He calls me to His death. He calls me to His new life. I am crucified in Christ and it is no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me, and the life I live I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave up His life for me. My life is hidden with Christ in God. I am His and He is mine. Without Him, I can do nothing and in and because of Him, nothing is impossible and I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.

And all this comes from Jesus. All from Jesus. All from Jesus. That is why “It’s still all about Jesus.” Our patron saint of blessed memory, The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther, called the Church back to this with His blog commonly called, “The 95 Theses,” that he promulgated and the Confessions which he helped write. As such, because “It’s still all about Jesus,” Luther never wanted the movement named after him (See how obedient we are!). It is why many prefer to call it the “Church of the Augsburg Confession” because that document — presented by civic-minded laypeople before an inexperienced, crisis-minded, G-20 summit-attending yet overly zealous religious fanatic who realized that cutting off the heads of German princes would only mean the end of His own rule — became the centerpiece to express that faith that has been revealed to us in God’s Holy Word by His Holy Spirit to deal with real life issues in the real lives of real living people who were dealing with church closures, church finances, church leaders, failed family programs, non-existent Sunday Schools, and other challenges that we face even today. They wanted to make sure that “It’s still all about Jesus” and that all that is done in response to our Lord’s extravagant grace is done “All for Jesus” and that the world would “Know Him.” And so, LCMS Lutherans in Black Ministry Family Convocation attendees, dare we take out the “Black” from of “Black Ministry Family Convocation” for at least a moment and dare we reflect together as a “Family Convocation,” which means that we keep this blunt, honest and clear with some practical import for our every day lives as we leave beautiful Birmingham after this
Lutherans are evangelical, catholic, and reforming, as Daniel Erlander aptly describes. So, stop being afraid of those words — evangelical, catholic, and reforming.

We are evangelical because we proclaim the Gospel of Jesus — that Christ alone took our sin away through His death on the cross and rising from the dead and delivers His grace to us freely through His Means of the Spirit, not because of anything that we have done but because of who He is and His inestimable love for us. That does not make us part of some political party but helps us see that this is a great political party only as we are partying in the grace, love and mercy of God with the polis — the people. Yes — it is all about how God’s grace and love in Christ is for all people.

We are catholic because we are connected — that means “hooked up” — not only with God but with each other. Baptism is not a Thrivent life insurance policy promising you that things will only get better and sweeter in the great by and by; Holy Baptism, Holy Absolution and the Holy Eucharist connect you with those who at one time might have been strangers but who are strangers no more because they are now friends and brothers. We are catholic because we “ain’t just find Jesus” and we are catholic because we did not decide to follow Jesus; Jesus decided to follow us … into the pit of our sin … and to deliver us from that pit to bring us to the green pastures and still waters where He restores our souls. We are connected happily with the ever-moving traditions of the Great Tradition and solid in our contention to keep that which is good and change only that which detracts from the Gospel. We are catholic because we are not “White only” or “Black only” or “Sola Latina” or anything else “only.” We are diverse and we are thankful for it.

We are reforming because we do not celebrate the 500th anniversary of the Reformation; we celebrate the 500th anniversary of the first Lutheran Reformation, realizing that God has not finished His reforming work in us, among us and through us. He who began a good work in you is able to complete it … and as The Rev. Dr. Victor Belton is apt to say, Jesus said on the cross, “It is finished,’ but it ain’t over.” The fat lady has not sung yet and the free-loading church folks have not even gotten the paper napkins out to cover their plates of chicken and macaroni and cheese that they intend to steal from the church hall at the end of the fellowship hour to take home — Do not even pretend that you do not know about what I am talking! No — Jesus is not done. This feast ain’t done. “There ain’t no party like a Holy Ghost party ‘cause a Holy Ghost party don’t stop!” The Reformation continues … and it had better continue in us and through us and in our own parishes if we dare to call ourselves “Lutherans” … if we dare to call ourselves “Christians.”

You do not have to discover reformation in denominational offices, waiting to see what bulletin inserts get published so that you can set stuff out on overly-cluttered tables in mildew-smelling church narthexes; after all, Luther did not see reformation zeal when he visited Rome but going to Rome helped Luther see the need for it.

You are not going to see reformation coming from the public housing project on 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue designed to symbolize freedom but built by slaves.

You do not have to read it by those who choose to Tweet their knee jerk reactions whether just to knee someone else or to show the world what a jerk they really are.

You do not have to view it in public squares where nativity sets are removed in deference to being politically correct. You do not have to hear it prayed in schools or see it scribbled above courtroom benches or written on money designed by philosophers loving racist theists.

You do not have to experience it in mega-mall mega gatherings of slick-dressed Bible peddlers whose ten steps to a better marriage may fill parking lots but leave souls empty.

You may not see it in comfy picket-fenced suburbs where soccer games and dance practices usurp Sunday School and religious education hours.

You do not have to notice it in less-than-inspiring ceremonies executed by poorly trained actors who talk about what they
know about Christ but clearly who do not know Christ.

Stop expecting the jewel to be glistening on a table in plain view when the pearl of great price is often hidden in a field.

After all, our theology is a theology of the cross. We preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews, foolishness to Greeks, but for us the power and wisdom of God. For God is hidden in what the world calls weak. God is strongest among the most vulnerable. God is made known even in hidden ways. Jesus is in the margins who came for the margins as One who was marginalized and as one who came to bring the marginalized to the center of the Feast. It is the Lukan great reversal that actually works in our favor. It allows us to sing “We Shall Overcome” because Jesus already overcame.

Look to the continent that many regard as an ancestral home. Look at Ethiopia and see the witness of Gudina Tumsa and others and see how the Church is exploding because people are not being tied up and tied down in tired old ways but who know the Confessions of the Church and, more importantly, who choose to live those Confessions, who embrace their Confirmation vows and who prefer to die rather than fall away from the Church. Look to the islands of the Caribbean and in South America where people are unafraid of defying animistic tendencies with a cosmic understanding of the First, Second and Third Articles of the Apostles’ Creed.

Look to the Church that is sometimes even called “the Black Church” in this country. It has defied the odds against it and has remained a force for justice and peace despite being threatened in the throes of violence and hatred. It has written the songs that make the whole world sing, as musical styles from the so-called “Black Church” have been lifted and used by people all over the world. It has welcomed the stranger and brought healing, hope and salvation in and through Christ alone, engendering the trans-denominational, ecumenical spirit of solidarity, integrity, mutuality and respect.

At its best, the Black Church has been about reforming, never about repristinating… reforming and not regurgitating… reforming and not regulating or regularizing or ridiculing… reforming and not relaxing until all people are free. People of color know all too well how challenging it is to live in persecution, but people of color also know how to get over it, to pick oneself up, dust oneself off, and start all over again. That is because we have been shown what resurrection is … we have been shown Who Resurrection is … and it is all by Jesus because it is all from Jesus and that is what makes it all for Jesus and — hallelujah — we do know Him.

It is for this reason, saints, why some family words need to be shared directly about how to confess Christ and truly know Him.

For one, the “golden age” for Black Lutherans in the United States of America or in The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod was not always all that golden. To pretend that it was better is not always a testament as to whether life actually were better. There were hard times in the LCMS during the last 140 years and there have been hard times among people of color within the Lutheran tradition for the past 500 years.

So, then, stop living life looking in the rearview mirror because if you do, you will crash and AAA will not come by to pick you up and you know that Uber does not even go to many of our neighborhoods!

Stop expecting the jewel to be glistening on a table in plain view when the pearl of great price is often hidden in a field.

After all, our theology is a theology of the cross. We preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews, foolishness to Greeks, but for us the power and wisdom of God. For God is hidden in what the world calls weak. God is strongest among the most vulnerable. God is made known even in hidden ways. Jesus is in the margins who came for the margins as One who was marginalized and as one who came to bring the marginalized to the center of the Feast. It is the Lukan great reversal that actually works in our favor. It allows us to sing “We Shall Overcome” because Jesus already overcame.

Look to the continent that many regard as an ancestral home. Look at Ethiopia and see the witness of Gudina Tumsa and others and see how the Church is exploding because people are not being tied up and tied down in tired old ways but who know the Confessions of the Church and, more importantly, who choose to live those Confessions, who embrace their Confirmation vows and who prefer to die rather than fall away from the Church. Look to the islands of the Caribbean and in South America where people are unafraid of defying animistic tendencies with a cosmic understanding of the First, Second and Third Articles of the Apostles’ Creed.

Look to the Church that is sometimes even called “the Black Church” in this country. It has defied the odds against it and has remained a force for justice and peace despite being threatened in the throes of violence and hatred. It has written the songs that make the whole world sing, as musical styles from the so-called “Black Church” have been lifted and used by people all over the world. It has welcomed the stranger and brought healing, hope and salvation in and through Christ alone, engendering the trans-denominational, ecumenical spirit of solidarity, integrity, mutuality and respect.

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His love each day. Live in hope and live in love because Jesus
business and not the fear business. Perfect love casts out all fear. We are in the
Church for a long, time. Stop moaning and start moving.

Stop being bound by laws that do not work, by rules that were written in conditions
that no longer apply, and by ideals based on ideas that never really existed even in
the so-called good ol’ days. You are a Lutheran which means that your theology
continues to develop and grow because the Holy Spirit continues to work through
Word and Sacraments. Jesus did not come to make all things old but to make all things
new. Sing a new song to the Lord and start on some new initiatives for His Kingdom,
put a funeral pall over those old programs and ideas that do not work and cart their
ugly, rotten, dry bones out of the sanctuary. Give a plaque, bouquet of flowers and a
handshake to those volunteers who need to be relieved of their duties, and move that
football down the field as you bounce that

Stop making excuses; start making disciples. If you build it, they may not come. But if you engage them, you may have a
shot at them. It is not about burying your father, checking on land you just purchased
or looking back when your hand is to the plough. Follow the Jesus who chased
you down and bore you up and “get to steppin,” saints!

Stop being content; start being passionate. No one likes Laodecian lukewarm Chris-
tians. And sadly, that is what is often peddled in our midst. If you do not believe it, get out
of leadership and pass that baton to someone else who does believe it while you take a
“time out” and get your bearings again.

Stop blaming “the man” unless that man or woman is you! Idealistic distortions
about race are not game changers. If you feel inferior every time you enter a room,
you will be treated that way. But you are a baptized, blood bought, child of God.
You do not owe anybody anything except to lay down your life for them. Do not be
fooled that “the man” even cares that much about you; be encouraged and energized,
however, that you have been called to pray for “the man” and love “the man” and that
part of your calling in life is to proclaim to “the man” and to all that “It’s still all about
Jesus” and that what we do is “All for Jesus” as we are called to “Know Him.”

Stop thinking you know it all; Know the One who knows you. We all have a lot to
learn and disciples are life-long learners.

Stop tearing each other down and being jealous of other pastors and ministries,
especially in the LCMS and especially among those of color. That is an Eighth
Commandment violation. This talking about other people and “Who does he
think he is?” and “Why does she think she is all that?” has to stop. God has given us
His Son Jesus to talk about. You “ain’t got time” to talk about other folks. We have to
stop tearing each other down. Cut it out as I rebuke that Godless gossip right now in
the Name of Jesus. It is destroying Christ’s Church and it is killing our babies, our
children, our teenagers, our adults and our seniors. They deserve better and you are
baptized better than that. Why people of color are so known for tearing down any of
us who climb a ladder or do any better and who in jealousy cannot celebrate other peo-
ple’s victories in the Body of Christ reveals our sinful Achilles heel. No more, saints.
No more of that!

Now for the “Black” part of the LCMS Lutherans in Black Ministry Convocation.

Black folks have been Church for a long time. People of color conducted the great
cumenical Councils of the Church, like in Nicea, Constantinople, Ephesus, and
Chalcedon. People of color have been the great preachers of the Church, like
Saint Augustine, who inspired Blessed Dr. Martin Luther. You have been Church
and all this is yours. As such, stop acting like amateurs who got called to this game
only 140 years ago. Our roots go way back. Bring that history into your proclamation
of His story.

Black people in the Church historically have been concerned with justice. And
justice is quintessential to Article Four of the Augsburg Confession on justification.
Social action and social justice is what we have been about and the rest of the LCMS
is counting on us to lead the way. Words are useless without action — take it from
Jesus! His Word created the world, released sinners from death, brought sight to the
blind and raised the dead. And you will do
even greater things than these.

Black churches at their best are notorious for being welcoming. The Charleston
Nine reminded us of that…and that congregation’s response and words to the
seemingly unrepentant murderer underscored that even more. We welcome
because we have not been welcomed and we know how it is not to be welcomed.
We welcome boys who prefer to keep their hats on inside buildings — after all, even the Pope says Mass wearing a
hat. We welcome men who are sagging, women whose skirts ride up too high, the
tattooed and the pierced, the cell phone addicts, the social media junkies and the
others whom the world dismisses. Our churches cannot be fashion plates but places for sinners of all stripes to come
to receive, teach, celebrate and share
Christ Jesus.
Black Christians — Black Lutherans — are, therefore, Eucharistic. Insist on that Meal at every worship service every week. The Mass is our identity element and we know how important eating together is for a family. Black folks “don’t party” without something to eat! Celebrate the Holy Eucharist with more reverence than your opponents and let that Bread of Life fuel you and your parish to be the Body of Christ in the world.

Black churches cannot be “Black only.” It is terrible how segregated people are on Sunday mornings when segregation has had to be perpetuated the rest of the week. This kind of demonic degradation has led to our own destruction and demise. Sit down with someone different from you and learn their stories and love them. You both will be the richer for it.

Black Lutherans are on the edges. We may have been marginalized and much has been taken from us, but the margins are where the real action is and where the real fun is anyway. Be thankful that God has gifts for people in the margins and has work for us to do in the margins. Propelled to the edges, the Black Church has been in the center of the action. Do not delegate or relegate that responsibility to anyone else.

Black Lutherans and Black churches are loving. As Bishop Desmond Tutu said, “Goodness is stronger than evil and love is stronger than hate” and, as Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. reminded us, “We can out-love their hate.” There are people in the world who hate you. Some of them are in the LCMS. Some are right here in this room. Some of them are in your own parishes. Some of them are in your family. But you do not win when you hate them back. Be prepared to be hated, to be rejected. Be ready for people to be jealous of you, for them to make fun of you and for them to call you vicious things behind your backs. That is how cowards play. Loving phonies and cowards, however, is the only way they can ever be converted. And God has called us to do so. A papal bull may have gotten this movement moving but bull continues every day. Do not let someone else’s bull stop you from being who you are in Christ Jesus.

In this way, Black Lutherans are both liturgical and contemporary, as we are evangelical, catholic and reforming. We insist on sharing Jesus “for you” to all. We rejoice in our historical and present-day connection with all who confess Christ. And we are reformers hearkening to the words of Frederick Douglass, “Agitate! Agitate! Agitate!” because we are not satisfied until all is for Jesus and we will not stop until all know Him.

After all, “It’s all about Jesus” and He is all about you and calls you to be all about Him and all about His people. Lutherans in Ministry among Blacks, Whites, Latinos, Asians and the like — you are known by Jesus. Know Him and follow Him to the cross, the grave and the sky, even when steeples are falling as you fall on your knees with your face to the rising Son. Pray for the Lord to raise up laborers for His harvest field. Move out of the way if you have become the impediment. Let the radical welcome of strangers and the reforming Spirit engage you in a renewed evangelical and catholic witness. Do so in ministry — just plain ministry — at the edges and with the margins. “We shall not be, we shall not be moved” as “Here we stand,” but do not ever let that mean that you just stand still. Stir it up. Flip things upside down — you are Lutherans and that is what we do, all for Jesus. Know Him by grace through faith. Keep it all about Jesus and keep it all for Jesus as you know Him.

And do that with the blessing of Almighty God — the Father, the Son + and the Holy Spirit.