

Lutheran Mission Matters



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Inside This Issue: Mission and Ministry In, Through and After (?) a Pandemic: What Have We Learned?

This issue focuses on the pandemic and how Christians respond to the challenges COVID-19 and its variants pose to congregational ministry and mission in our generation. In the last two years a brand-new vocabulary has appeared in our daily conversation, reading, and writing. Social distancing is encouraged almost everywhere, and wearing masks (or not), and vaccinations and booster doses are a part of life everywhere to those willing to receive them. Health departments and medical professionals are strongly encouraging the use of various sanitizing devices even within the household to prevent transmission of this mysterious and life-threatening infectious disease.

The Internet has already changed the way humans learn, communicate, do business, and build communities in today's high-tech world. The Christian church is a community of believers. Worship and witnessing is a shared experience for the people of God whom God calls and gathers to belong together in the name of Jesus Christ. The fellowship of believers interacting with one another is a defining quality that cannot be adequately translated into any other form. Interdependence of members is normative for the Christian faith to thrive and survive. Our encounter with the pandemic makes us wonder if the current church structures distance the congregants from one another, forcing them to a more detached and isolated manner of life.

Inside this issue, *Lutheran Mission Matters* is presenting a variety of essays, book reviews, and mission reflections that help the reader to rethink how Christians may minister to others in a meaningful way to build and sustain fellowship in critical situations such as the pandemic. The book reviews relate to the pandemic, representing the literature that has come out instantaneously responding to the new reality of our time.

From his hands-on research in the Michigan District, Todd Jones notes that the pandemic has provided a unique opportunity to explore the challenges facing parish ministry in a time when face-to-face relationships and on-site ministry activities are not possible as they used to be. The investigation underscores that further research and study is necessary to better prepare workers for ministries that may require parish ministry to move away from the conventional building and large-group gathering model.

Scott Gress proposes that the mission of God is always worth the struggle, and coaching can help to engage and re-engage an ever-widening circle of people including those who are further away from Jesus. Coaching, when done mindfully, can enable ministries to respond appropriately to change, as when the community is faced with a pandemic experience.

Seminary professor Mark Granquist draws lessons from history about how American colleges and universities handled the 1918 influenza epidemic. His essay explains how young Lutheran women and men on campuses were affected by this event—the quarantines, the loss of classmates, and other traumas. Furthermore, Lutheran colleges were housing military personnel along with students. The pandemic gave students a focus, and a vision for service to the gospel, and produced great missionaries who brought the gospel of Jesus Christ to peoples around the world.

We are privileged to publish a paper by Markus Nietzsche of the Independent Evangelical Lutheran Church of Germany (SELK) that he first presented to a pastors conference in Germany. Nietzsche speaks pastorally how we minister to a population that wrestles with questions raised by the pandemic as it became a global challenge. At this critical juncture humanity is confronted by the basic question of survival, stemming from a situation that tries to take control of human lives in unprecedented ways. As an advisory template the author presents his reflections in the hope of encouraging further collegial discussions as Christians pay close heed to God's work through the Holy Spirit in His Word.

Concordia Theological Seminary India Principal Christudas speaks personally on our theme, since he himself was on a ventilator for six weeks in the hospital having become a victim of the pandemic. The entire campus was hit hard, and the seminary administration as well as the classes had to be run online for a full semester. The campus was still rebuilding after hurricanes and thunderstorms had leveled most of the buildings. In this essay the author addresses questions of identity and security as Lutherans in a multi-denominational and pluri-religious context. Christudas suggests that the new normal situation requires that the Church renew its vision, theology, and mission to become relevant to the current situation. The ministry of Jesus Christ was a new normal, preparing people as a kingdom community over and against the massive oppression by both the Roman Empire and Jewish religious structures. The post-pandemic Christians must face the contextual realities with the same vigor of the early followers of Christ.

Werner Klän presents a lengthy essay on how Church bodies in Germany are faced with questions of identity in a post-Christian culture. The Christian calling compels church bodies to be aware of the issues of both faith and culture as they engage the society. While the church as institution struggles with becoming relevant to its surroundings, it is also committed to faithful confession and tradition. This essay documents that experience theologically as Christians deal with questions of church and state relationships especially when government rules and regulations restrict the life and mission of the church.

Wondimu Game posits the reality that the one faith we believe and confess is universally relevant, and its missional significance and application is practical in his native country of Ethiopia. Game presents his detailed study of the Apostles' Creed to prove the point. The Creed describes the Triune God as the Missionary God. God's missionary act was demonstrated when He first breathed life into man and gave

mankind authority over creation. In the same breath God promised redemption of the fallen human race. Doubtless, God's redemptive work in Christ shows His missionary nature.

Armand Boehme's essay on the new religions of the 21st century addresses some of the changes that have occurred in the study of world religions. One of the dramatic changes has been the understanding of religion itself. As overview, Boehme concentrates on select books and materials, written for several different purposes, which define or use the word *religion* in ways very different from the traditional understanding of that term in Western culture. Boehme claims that in the West, religion no longer holds a pivotal position in the formation of faith and culture as it did in the earlier generations.

In the mission reflection section, Professor David Mennicke reviews the effect of the pandemic on church music. He notes that Christian music is soothing for people who are struggling with the pandemic, as it calms the soul especially in times of crises. The author explains his thesis from his own decades-long years of teaching and singing and involving in the ministry of music.

Finally, Vernon Wendt contends that online ministry is here to stay as the church is looking to successfully merge and keep pace with the information highway in spreading the gospel. But ministry and evangelism requires going beyond the electronic devices and big screens into the lives of the people around us, as we personally look for ways and opportunities to share with them the Good News that Jesus sinners does receive!

We pray the threats and the fear of the pandemic will soon be over. But giving witness to the mighty acts of God and His preeminence in all things will continue to be the theme of the church's ministry and mission. That song is music to the ears in the present age and in the age to come.

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