

Lutheran Mission Matters



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LUTHERAN MISSION MATTERS

Journal of the Lutheran Society for Missiology

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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.

Victor Raj, editor, *Lutheran Mission Matters*

Articles

Ministry in the Midst of a Pandemic: A Study of the Impact of COVID-19 on the Congregations of the Michigan District

Todd Jones

Abstract

A multi-phase research project was conducted by the Michigan District to explore the impact and implications of the COVID-19 pandemic on congregational mission and ministry. Twenty-six percent of the congregations in the District and forty-three percent of clergy participated in the surveys. The pandemic provided a unique opportunity to explore the challenges facing parish ministry in a time when face-to-face relationships and on-site ministry activities were not possible. The study identified areas for further research and discussion to better prepare workers and ministries should their parish ministry need to move away from a building, large-group gathering model. The research findings highlighted the need for additional study in seven distinct areas of mission and ministry including:

1. Relationships Matter
2. The Rise of Consumerism
3. Divisiveness
4. Theological Foundations for “Online Ministry”
5. Finances
6. Mission Opportunities
7. Breaking Institutional Barriers



Rev. Dr. Todd Jones serves as an assistant to the president in the Michigan District where he assists in the development of new mission starts and develops continuing education. He has trained church planters in a variety of overseas contexts. He earned a PhD in the field of global training and can be reached at todd.jones@michigndistrict.org.

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Introduction

In April 2021 the congregations and members of the Michigan District were invited to participate in a multi-phase research project exploring the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on parish ministry. The quantitative and qualitative data examined the impact of the pandemic on a congregations' worship modality, worship attendance, and congregational health factors including financial data. A second instrument utilized a qualitative survey to gather perspectives on the impact of the pandemic on ministry from the perspective of the church workers within the Michigan District. The research project was undertaken to better understand the impact of the pandemic on the health of parish ministries in the Michigan District as the State of Michigan eased out of its restrictions on in-person gathering.

This article will begin with a description of the sample pool and research methodology. An overview of the Pandemic experienced by the state of Michigan and the congregations' responses to the pandemic will follow. The bulk of this paper will focus on the responses provided by the church workers of the Michigan District based on their reflections of ministry during the pandemic. Finally, the paper will end with observations and suggestions for further research.

Historical View of the pandemic: A Look at Congregational Responses in Michigan

To best understand the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on ministry, it is crucial to frame a congregation's response within the broader context of the government's response to COVID-19. The data collected in Illustration 1 provides a focused timeline of crucial actions taken by the government in response to the COVID-19 infection rates.

The Governor of the State of Michigan ordered a ban on gatherings larger than 50 people starting March 17, 2020. Religious institutions were not exempted from the mandate. Most congregations on the Michigan District honored the order by suspending in-person worship gatherings. On March 21, 2020, the Governor announced that the gathering limitations applied to churches, but they would not be prosecuted should they choose to disobey the executive order on public gatherings. By April 13, 2020, the Governor had issued a stay-at-home order banning all activity that was not essential. The stay-at-home order further reduced the number of congregations that held in-person worship. On October 12, 2020, the Michigan Supreme Court struck down the Governor's orders regarding public gatherings for places of worship.

The rate of infections and the Governor's restrictions on in-person gatherings formed the center of the data collection timeline. The data collected began with January 2020 and ended with April 2021. While the Delta Variant has extended the

COVID-19 pandemic longer than anticipated, this study's focus was ministry during the time of the ban on public gatherings and the stay-at-home orders.

Study Methodology

Qualitative and quantitative data was gathered using two survey instruments. One instrument was completed by representatives of congregations and included worship, attendance, and offering trends for each month from January 2020 to April 2021. A second instrument was a qualitative survey in which church workers and lay leaders shared their impressions and experiences in ministry during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The congregations' annual reports completed for Synod formed the third source of data analyzed in this report. The data was triangulated across the three instruments using the congregation's name and city as unique identifiers. Ninety-three congregations were represented in all three instruments. The sample represented 26% of the congregations in the District.

Study Findings

The findings from the data collections were organized using the themes of "COVID-19 and the Congregation" and "COVID-19 and the Members of the Michigan District." An analysis of the data for the theme "COVID-19 and the Congregation" focused on the following two questions:

1. How did congregation respond to the pandemic and government mandates?
2. What was the impact of the pandemic on their organizational health?

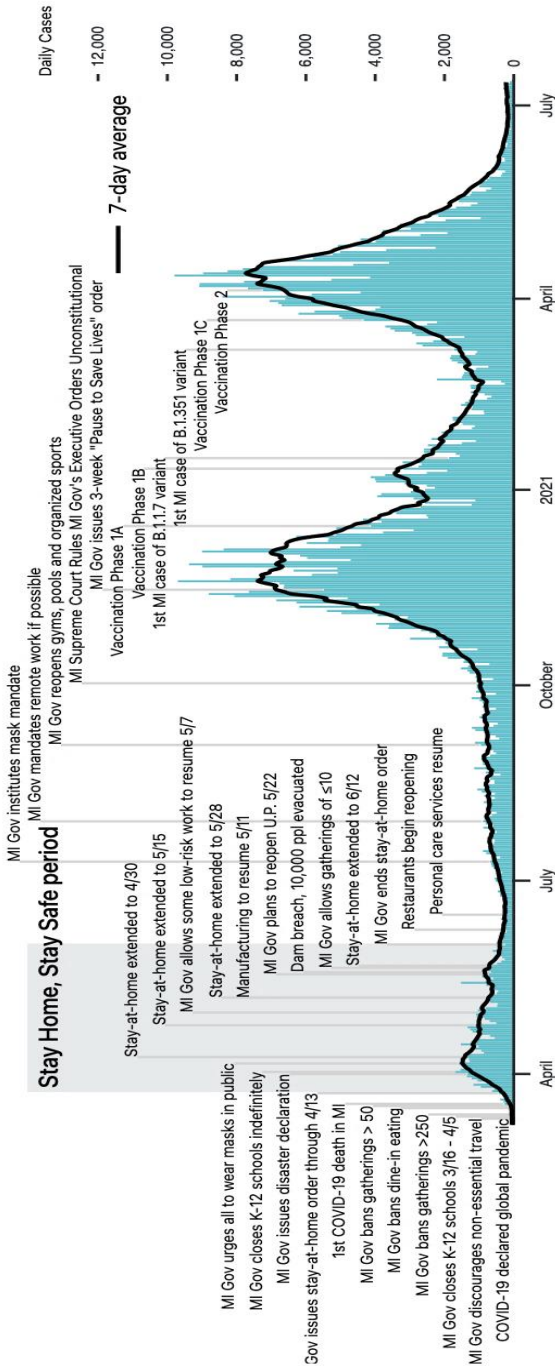


Illustration 1

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Section 1 – COVID-19 and the Congregation

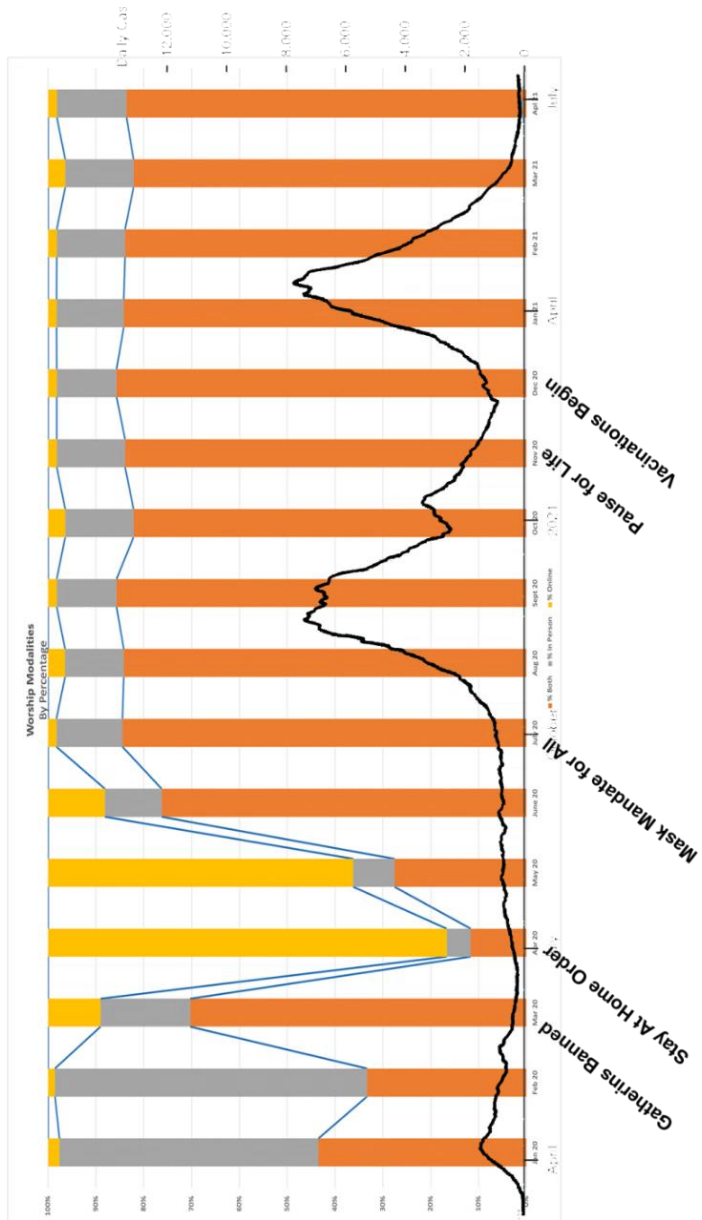
1. How did congregation respond to the pandemic and government mandates?

The survey data indicated that congregations offering only in-person worship decreased to less than 20% attendance by March 2020, down significantly from 65% in-person worship attendance in January and February of that same year. The congregations offering only in-person worship reported less than 10% for the remainder of the research window. As would be expected, congregations offering only online worship expanded dramatically to 83% in April of 2020 but decreased rapidly to 64% in May, 12% in June, and remained around 2% for the remaining study window. The responses indicated that 44% of congregations were livestreaming their live services in January of 2020. By March of 2020, 70% of the congregations were livestreaming their live services. From July 2020 to April 2021, approximately 84% of congregations were offering worship in-person and online.

Graph 1 provides an overview of the increased use of online tools for worship and the increased reported cases of COVID-19 infections in Michigan. Of the congregations that provide online worship services and indicated the platform for video distribution, 37% used the Facebook live platform only, 12% used YouTube only, 47% used both platforms, and 4% used other platforms.

Generally, the congregation's context was not a factor on the decision to be exclusively online or in-person for worship. The one exception was the response rate of urban congregations. Congregations in an urban context moved to offering only online worship at a much more rapid rate than other ministry contexts. Urban congregations moved from 13% online-only worship in February 2020 to 38% in March 2020. By April of 2021, 4% of urban congregations were offering online worship only compared to less the .2 % of the other congregations of the District.

Graph 1: Worship Modalities



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2. What was the impact of the pandemic on their organizational health?

The impact of the congregations' responses to the pandemic were analyzed using attendance and contribution trends. Seventy-six percent of the participants provided worship attendance statistics for each month during the 16-month study window of January 2020 to April 2021. The percentage enabled a statistically valid sample for comparison attendance trends across the District during the COVID-19 study period. However, in most cases, the sample became too small for valid results when using co-factors like worship style within specific organizational vitality or ministry context segments. Two factors impacted the quality of data collected for online worship. First, online platforms for streaming do not have a consistent method of measuring views.

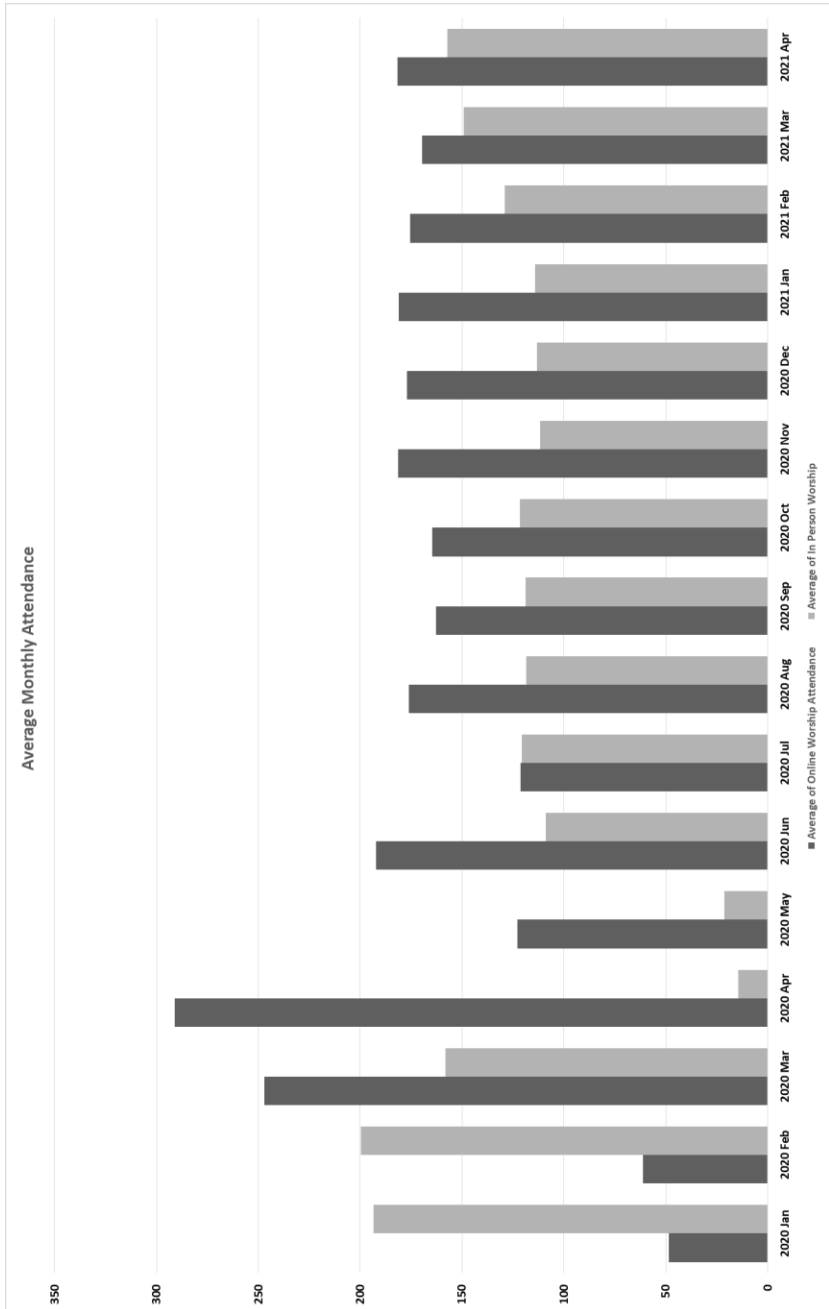
Second, many congregations utilized multipliers in factoring worship attendance in the assumption that generally more than one person would be viewing the service online. Third, forty-eight of the participants provided information about their congregation's monthly offerings during the study period. While the number of responses was sufficient for general trends across the District, only the first five months received adequate data to make valid assertions about finances within context and organizational vitality categories. The survey asked the participants only to record offerings for each month in the study period. However, it could be possible that some congregations processed their PPP loans through their offerings resulting in skewed numbers.

Attendance Trends

Graph 2 displays the monthly total average attendance as a blue and orange bar combined to represent the total attendance average for the month. The blue bar is the average of the reported online worship attendance (OWA), and the orange bar is the average in-person worship attendance (IPW). While no data could explain the significantly higher combined attendance figures for March, it is most likely the result of the chaos of the transition during March, when people were more likely to be in both services. It is possible that people from congregations not offering livestreaming of worship services inflated attendance numbers for March and April by attended worship services at congregations that did offer online worship.

Online worship numbers continued to remain strong through April 2021. At that same time, in-person worship attendance showed a slow but steady recovery from the low-point of April and May. During November 2020 and December 2020, the state of Michigan experienced a significant increase in COVID-19 cases. During that time, in-person worship decreased slightly, while online worship remained unchanged.

Graph 2: Attendance Trends During the Study Period



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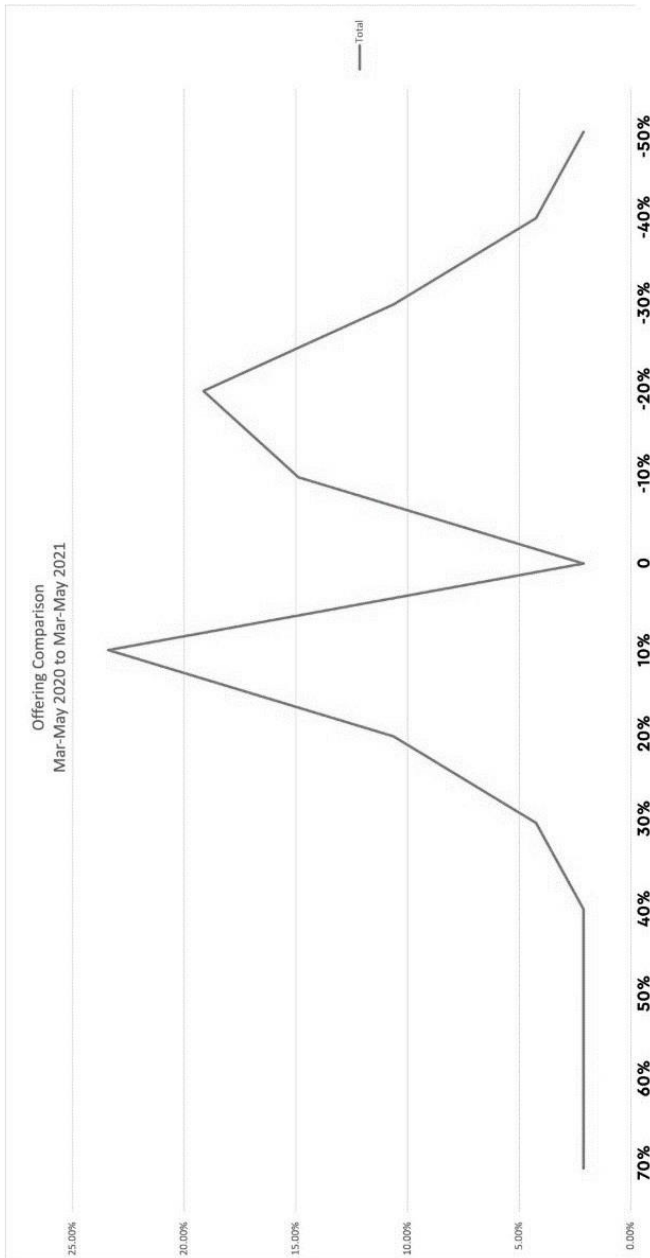
Financial Trends

Average Contribution Trends

The participants generally indicated that finances were not considered a significant concern. Many reported that their receipts exceeded expenses during the study period. The data provided by participants indicated that all participating congregations lost an average of 11% of their annual receipts. However, as noted in Graph 3, many ministries did well, while others suffered tremendously.

Graph 3 was developed using a year-over-year comparison of February, March, April 2020 and 2021. Congregations were placed in categories based on the difference between the two years. Each category represented one 10% difference in contributions between the two years. Category 1 had the most significant gain of a 71% increase in offerings. Category 9 represented a zero difference between contributions received in the three months between 2020 and 2021. Category 14 represented those congregations that had a negative difference between the three months in 2020 and 2021 of 40 to 49 percent. An examination of the graph reveals that 23% of congregations experienced a moderate increase of less than 10% in donations for the year-over-year comparisons on March, February, and April. In contrast, 15% of congregations experienced a 10% or minor decrease in offerings, and 15% experienced between 10% and 20% decrease in offerings.

Graph 3: Financial Trends



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Section 2 - COVID-19 Pandemic and the Members of the Michigan District

The second section of the report contains an analysis of the qualitative data collected from the survey responses completed by called workers, ministry staff, and lay leaders. Key themes related to the pandemic's impact on ministry leaders within the Michigan District were identified through the analysis of the data.

1. Challenges Presented by the Pandemic

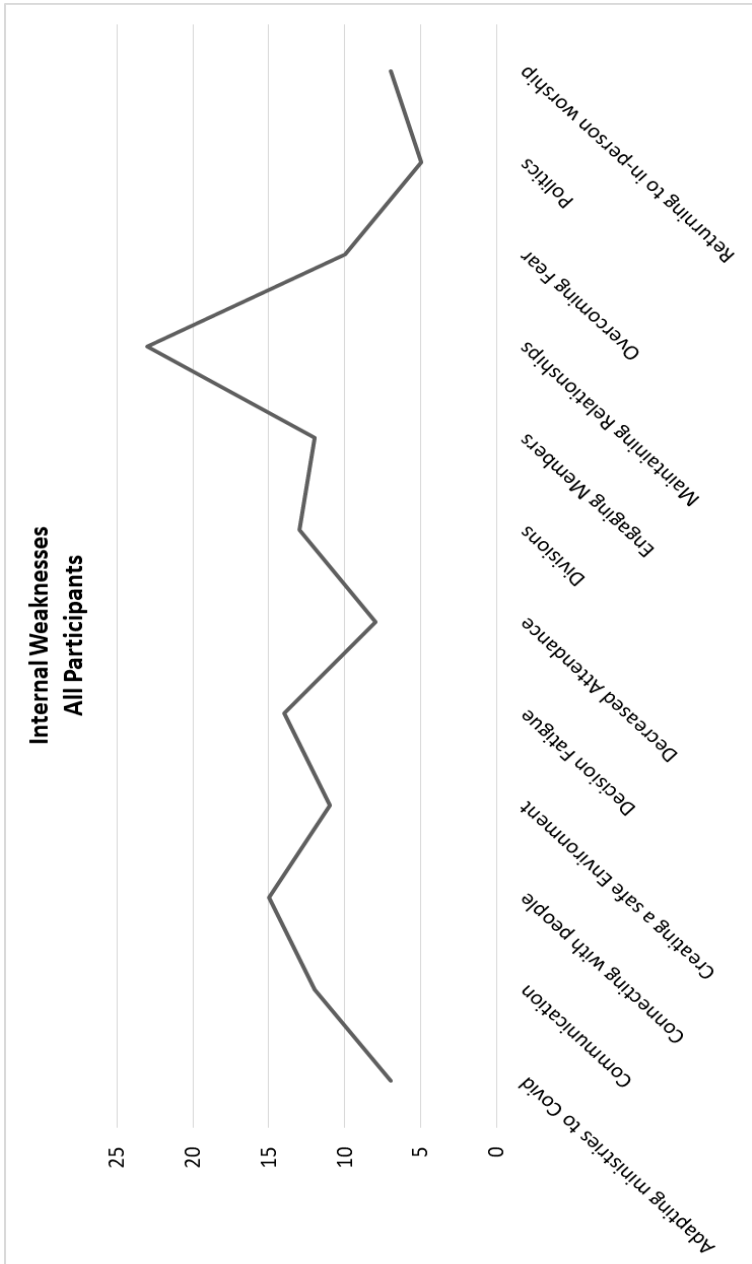
A. Personal Challenges

The participants were asked to identify challenges in their ministry which they faced during the COVID-19 pandemic. The responses were placed into two categories: internal weaknesses and external threats.

Internal Weaknesses

The most frequently mentioned internal weaknesses during the pandemic were “Maintaining Relationships” and “Connecting with People.” Generally, the participants referenced the inability to have in-person worship or host fellowship events during the pandemic when they spoke of the difficulty of “Maintaining Relationships.” Many expressed a sense of personal loss at not being able to have one-on-one conversations. While the increased use of technology such as Zoom helped, it wasn't the same. Some expressed the feeling of exhaustion from Zoom fatigue. One participant indicated the following paraphrased statement, “I am calling more people in a single week than perhaps any time before in my ministry yet feeling more disconnected than ever before.”

Graph 4: Worker Response: Internal Weaknesses



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External Threats

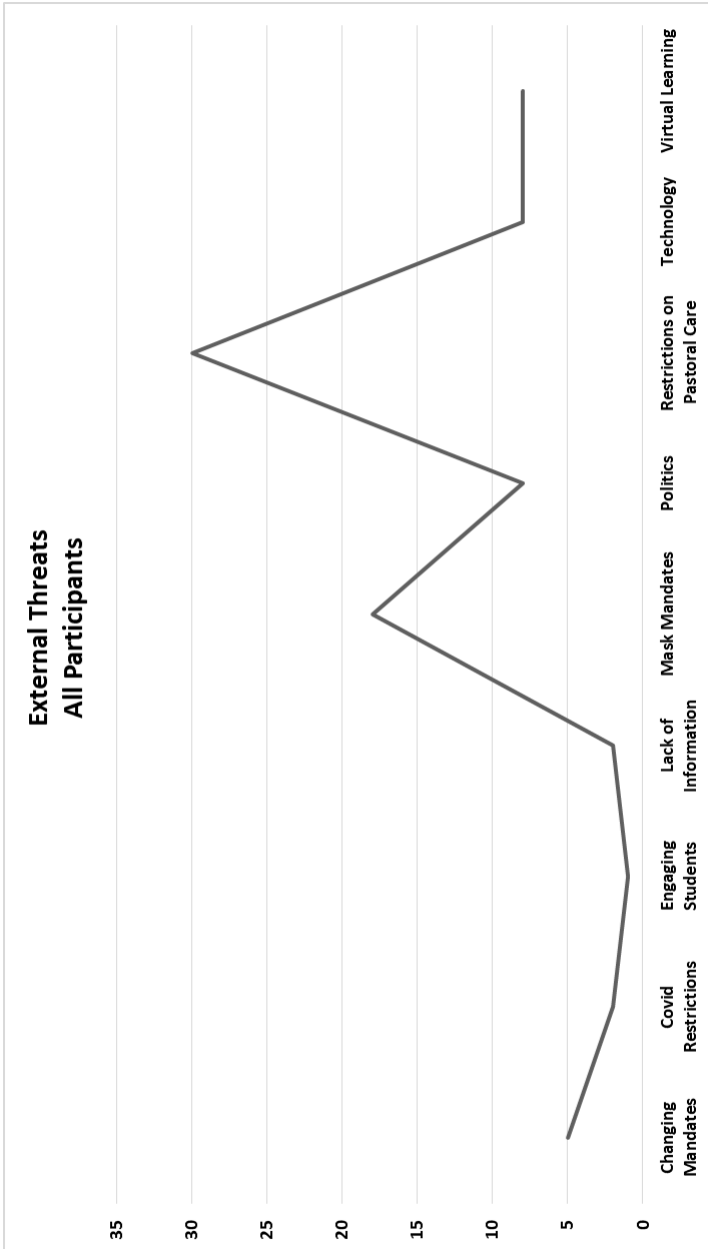
The “T” in the SWOT analysis are the external threats to the organization. Certainly, the pandemic was the most significant external threat. However, the participants were asked to identify the challenges they faced during the COVID-19 pandemic, and the following was their top list of external threats to their ministry. Graph 5 contains a summary of coded responses.

The single item that caused the most significant concern was the government’s restrictions on pastoral care during the height of the pandemic. Many pastors were denied access during their members’ final hours of their life. Restrictions prevented pastors from visiting members in nursing homes. Many pastors felt restricted from visiting homebound members out of concern for the health of the member or the pastor’s family. Several pastors indicated that they sought ways to minister to those in institutional settings while being sensitive to the individual’s fears and obedient to the state mandates.

While pastors and lay leaders were united on their perception that restrictions on pastoral care were the most significant external threat, mask mandates was the second most common external threat to ministry. Thirty-eight percent of the participants expressed frustrations with the changing mandates; others pointed to the deep divisions created around masks. The divisions closely aligned with the political ideologies of our nation. Sadly, the division language is present in the survey responses themselves as one participant refers to the “other side” as people refer to those with whom they disagree as “the far right that resists the reality of COVID.”

Another participant expressed disdain for congregations that require masks or suspended services as a compromise to the true Christian faith.

Graph 5: Worker Response External Threats



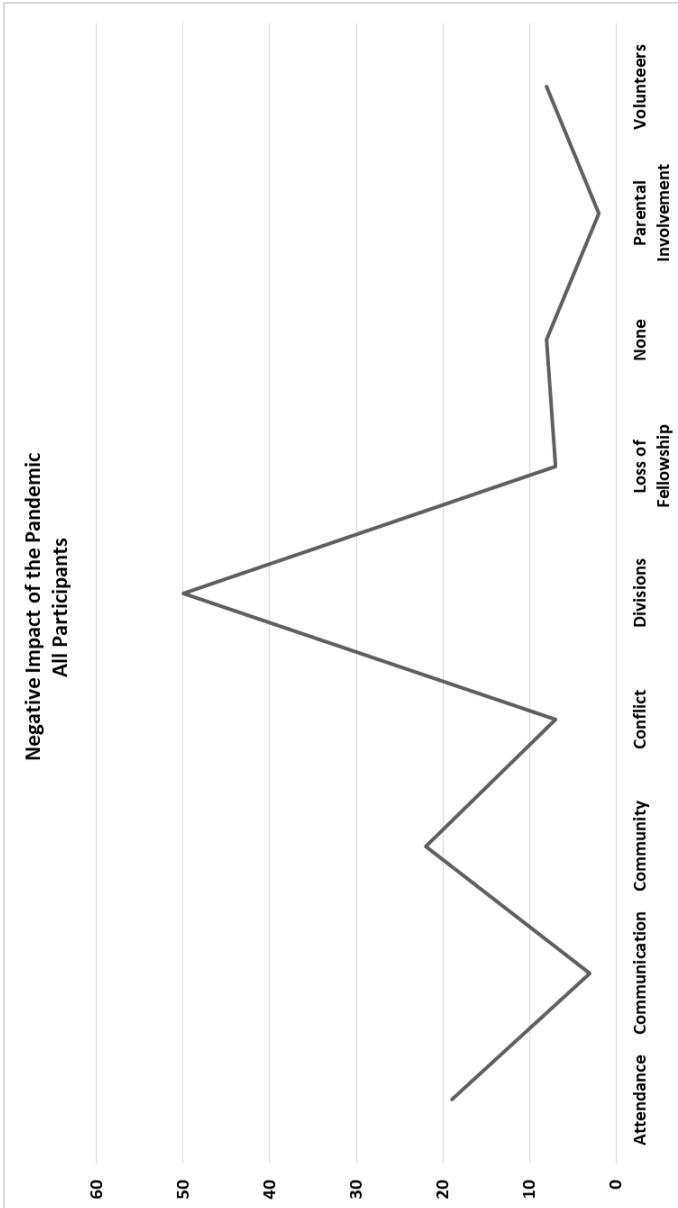
B. Ministry Impact

The participants were asked to share their impressions of the impact of COVID-19 on their ministry. The responses were placed into two impact categories, positive and negative. One hundred and twenty-six respondents shared a negative impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Graph 6 contains an overview of all the impacts that received two or more mentions from the respondents. Those topics that received only one mention were burnout, consumerism, fear, inward focus, loss of members, conflict between pastor and members, and lack of volunteers.

Division within the congregation was the item that was mentioned most frequently as a negative impact. Political divisions involving the mask mandate were most frequently cited as an impact. However, physical separation due to social distancing and fear of the virus were mentioned frequently. Less common, but expressed by more than one person, was a perceived division between those who maintained pure doctrine and did not suspend services or holy communion and those who were perceived to have chosen man's law over God's law. One individual suggested that the decline in attendance in many congregations indicated God's punishment for compromise.

Loss of community was the second most common response. The participants referenced the elimination or reduction of in-person worship during quarantine periods and the inability to gather for community dinners and events. Attendance was the third most significant concern shared by the participants. While most congregations that offered in-person worship also provided livestreaming of their worship service, most desired their membership to return to in-person worship as the pandemic threat diminished. The participants shared a vital concern that most people who had transitioned to in-home worship would not return to in-person worship. They believed that convenience, flexibility, and the lack of accountability were more powerful motivators for in-home worship than the benefits of in-person worship. Three participants expressed concern that perhaps the move to introduce in-home worship had been a mistake.

Graph 6: Worker Responses: Negative Impact of the Pandemic



C. Mission Impact

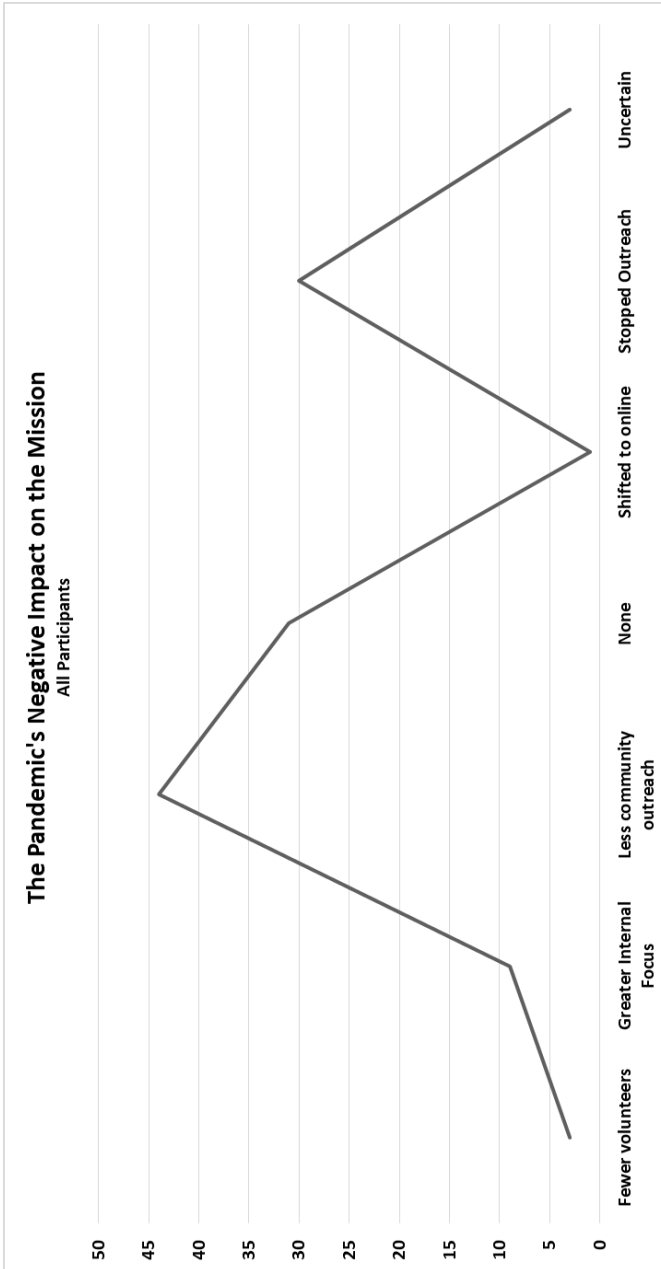
The participants were asked to share their perceptions of the impact of the pandemic on the mission of their ministries. One hundred and twenty-one of the 218 responses received were classified as negative based on the participants' descriptions of the impact. Graph 7 contains an overview of the negative responses identified from the survey data.

As noted from the graph, most of the respondents believed that the pandemic reduced or eliminated outreach. Some shared that the reduction in outreach directly resulted from social distancing policies and shelter at home orders. Some shared that the reduction or elimination resulted from the congregation lacking the technology or skills to reach out to the community through social media or the internet. Others asserted that the elimination of outreach was the necessary result of reduced staff capacity and the elimination of in-person worship. Thirty-one of the responses reported that the pandemic did not have any impact on the mission of the local congregation.

Ninety-seven of the 218 responses were classified as positive based on the participants' descriptions of the impact. Graph 8 presents the positive impacts expressed in the survey and the impact's frequency.

As indicated in the graph, the most frequent response was that the pandemic did not positively impact the church's mission. The second most common response regarding the positive impact of the pandemic on the mission of the ministries was the addition of online tools for worship and community engagement. Several participants shared experiences of individuals from around the country and the world who became regular participants in worship and Bible study through technology. Some of the ministries with increased participation by geographically dispersed guests indicated that many contributed to community discussion and online financial contributions. While only mentioned by one person specifically in this question, two other participants in answering previous questions supported the assertion that the pandemic placed a greater emphasis on our schools as a potential outreach tool. Traditional "public school only" families enrolled their children in Lutheran schools to avoid virtual public education. The increase in non-church member enrollments provides excellent opportunities to share the Gospel and help new families connect to the church.

Graph 7: Worker Responses: Pandemic's Negative Impact on Mission



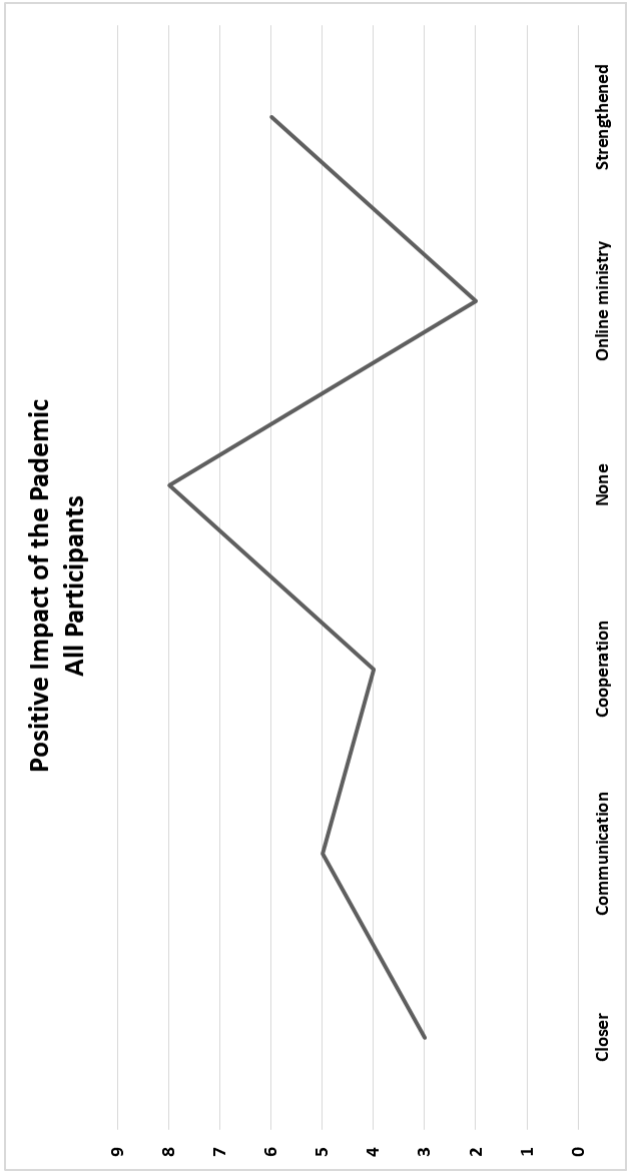
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Graph 8: Worker Responses: Pandemic's Positive Impact on Mission



Section Three: General Discussion

One of the objectives of this study was to identify areas for further research and discussion so that our congregations might be better prepared should their parish ministry need to move away from a building, large-group gathering model. In the context of preparing for mission and ministry without a permanent location and building, four learning points could be identified.

1. Relationships Matter

The church is strongest when the church is relational. God works through His people to strengthen, comfort, and encourage the members of His body. While there is a place for an evangelistic proclamation in a large gathering, much of the church's mission work happens one on one as God's people interact with those who still live in the world. Social distancing, the suspension of public gatherings, and the prohibition on pastoral care in the institutional setting have dramatically impacted the vitality of the congregation and the emotional well-being of God's people.

We can celebrate the hard work, the long hours, and the sacrifices made by congregational members, ministry staff, pastors, teachers, and administrators as they scrambled to develop new channels of communication so that God's work through the church and school could continue. At the same time, it must be acknowledged that the relational aspects of technology-mediated interactions are not sufficient for the vibrant ministry. The steady decline of online worship in favor of in-person worship supports this claim. The number of workers and members that expressed an overwhelming sense of isolation and loneliness during the pandemic support the claim. Finally, the data collected from outside sources¹ found that at the height of the pandemic, the number of worshippers who participated in online worship decreased significantly² within the first 18 minutes. Further research and exploration may determine the factors that contribute to social connectedness in a technology-mediated community. A theological framework of pastoral ministry and community that is not centered on the building or institutional programs needs to be developed to guide the process of developing new, Biblically and Confessionally sound ministry models.

2. Divisiveness

A strong thread of concern shared in the report was divisiveness. It has been said that a crisis will bring a family closer together or drive them apart. Such seems to be the case with the pandemic. Several workers expressed exhaustion from dealing with divisive individuals who have attempted to attribute political agendas to congregational decisions. While the thread is real and troubling, the more disturbing reality is the divisive language that the participants use to refer to others. For example, some participants spoke of the "radical right," and others referred to "woke-ism of the

left.” Most troubling was the minority of the participants who expressed the belief that suspending in-person worship was compromising the faith to “please men.” The pandemic has further eroded trust among ministries and those who serve in ministry. The issue of divisiveness is at its roots an attack on the body of Christ and a deterrent to healthy congregational life and effective outreach. The research of this study indicates that the divisiveness, in a large part, comes from the lack of preparation for a catastrophic event, such as the pandemic. The study data would further indicate that a portion of the body of Christ view all change as inherently bad, while the other views it as inherently good. A theological framework of the church that is not rooted in buildings and programs would help address the concerns of the former while providing a tool for effective evaluation of methods for the latter.

3. Theological Foundations for “Online Ministry”

The lack of theological discussion and study related to “online ministry” or “online worship” has contributed to the divisive activity of the pandemic. As noted from the worker responses, some pastors believe a worship gathering is only valid when people and pastor physically gather in a shared space around the Word and Sacraments. Other pastors believe that a technology-mediated community is as valid as a physically gathered community. These pastors assert that the elevation of in-person worship over online worship is sacerdotalism. This second group of pastors often argue that in-home worship is the church of the future. The largest segment of our pastors have viewed online worship as a pragmatic decision and do not attribute theological intent with choice. Like many issues in our church, we believe that ignoring the differences will diminish their power to divide our churches. In reality, it is the lack of discussion that empowers the two extremes.

4. Mission Opportunities

Most of the participants that expressed optimism for mission opportunities in the post-pandemic world believed that the opportunities would occur through online ministry or online activity. However, as mentioned earlier, our faith’s strength has historically been in our relationships and person-to-person interactions. If congregations go down the path of online ministry, research needs to be conducted to determine if healthy relationships can be formed, sustain, and grow through technology-mediated social interactions. Models of successful online or in-home ministries need to be developed or identified.

A second option for mission would be the use of an asset-mapping process to determine how the local congregation could leverage its strength—relational ministry—to extend its mission reach in the community it serves. For example, a congregation could fill the void of safe in-person gatherings by hosting small

gatherings around a shared interest. A congregation could provide study pods and mentors for small groups of students to interact socially engaged in online learning.

5. Breaking Institutional Barriers

One of the greatest frustrations expressed by pastors in the survey was their frustration at not providing pastoral care to members in care facilities and hospitals. Institutions of health originated within the church. Valid studies have demonstrated that spiritual care positively impacts health care treatments. It was tragic that many people of faith perished without a pastoral visit due to policies developed contrary to those research studies. It would be easy to point the finger at the government or the institutions themselves. However, much of the blame might lie with our clergy who have neglected to form a collaborative partnership with hospitals and health care providers. The church historically has had many fruitful opportunities to share the Gospel through the health care system. In smaller locations, rebuilding the connection between patients' spiritual and physical care might be simply a matter of developing a relationship with the hospital administrator and offering to serve as a volunteer chaplain. In larger, corporate hospitals, it may require more formal work to identify and mitigate their concerns. We might gain credibility with larger institutions by developing a version of Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE), which has been abbreviated to focus on patient privacy issues, working in the hospital environment, and contagion mitigation procedures.

Conclusion

Some people might wonder at the value of a report on the pandemic. It would be easy to categorize the study as "interesting but useless." However, the pandemic has had an impact on our congregations and schools. Church leaders would do well to determine how to assist congregations and church leaders in a healthy response for the short-term future. More importantly, the pandemic may serve as a wake-up call for a future pandemic that could dwarf COVID-19. Congregations and schools would be more successful during the pandemic if resources and policies were put in place based on what has been learned through this study and subsequent studies.

Finally, a second pandemic may seem like a very remote possibility. However, the loss of in-person worship in our church buildings may not be so far off for many. A review of the financial condition of our congregations would indicate that many may not be able to retain their buildings ten years in the future. The idea of church without buildings is not new, but it largely has existed among the fringe of mission-focused churches or advocates of missional communities. However, a push by the state of Wisconsin in 2019 to remove the property tax exemption on religious institution serves as a reminder that a future in which congregations must pay property tax may not be far into the future. If congregations were to be asked to pay property taxes,

many congregations would no longer be able to afford their buildings and would be forced into ministry outside the building.³ The pandemic has given us a few potential paths and pitfalls to a future where many congregations are no longer able to meet in their buildings. Perhaps through greater analysis and more profound theological reflection, models of healthy ministries that are not dependent on the building-centric ministry typical of most of our congregations may be identified.

Endnotes

¹The Barna Group, (2021). The New Sunday Morning, accessed at <https://www.barna.com/research/new-sunday-morning/>

² MacDonald, A., Stetzer, E., and Wilson, T., (2020). How church leaders are responding to the challenges of COVID-19. Exponential Webinar, accessed at <https://exponential.org/resource-ebooks/response-to-COVID-19/>

³ Miller, J. (2015). Is it time for nonprofits to pay property taxes. Badger Institute, accessed at <https://www.badgerinstitute.org/Commentary/Is-it-time-for-nonprofits-to-pay-property-taxes.htm>

Strategic Planning Doesn't Work Here!

How to Be Productive When the Future Is Unclear

Scott Gress

Abstract

Mission and ministry certainly have changed due to the pandemic. In some cases, it was frame-breaking change. One thing we learned was that strategic planning doesn't work here! What we also learned along the way was that serious issues we had overlooked became starkly apparent. Furthermore, we learned we need a new helping skill to adequately address these issues.

Historically, church and ministry moved forward with strategic planning approaches that ran the gamut from detailed goals, strategies, and tactics to a more casual approaches that merely asked, "what did we do last year?" Most planning was based upon what we knew and was forecasted into the future. But then comes a pandemic. It upends not only what we had planned or hoped to do, but it also unsettles our assumptions. The impact couldn't have been predicted.

Meanwhile, other transitions continued. The family structure, people's time and energy, member and leader engagement or lack thereof has impacted the church. A member's commitment to two- or three-year terms of leadership is often a nonstarter. Then on top of it all are the racial, political and social tensions.

Taken together, these and other factors join the pandemic to catch ministry-minded leaders flat-footed and unprepared to meet the future. The first option is not to stop planning, but rather to approach planning much differently with the help of coaching. The blessed surprise is that when done mindfully, coaching can help to engage and re-engage an ever-widening circle of people including those who are



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further away from Jesus. Such coaching can empower more of the body of Christ to engage in mission and ministry. It also enables a ministry to be nimbler and to respond appropriately as cultures and people change or even when we experience a pandemic. The pathway to this is fraught with barriers and challenges but it is worth the struggle. The mission of God is always worth the struggle.

What Was Your Pandemic Experience? A Temporary Fix

What changed for you during the pandemic? You might say, “everything!” But think again. What really changed? What likely changed was the way you did a few, but very important, things, like celebrating the resurrection in-person every Lord’s day. We gathered as the “communion of saints,” but rules, laws, and common courtesy based upon Christian love (Rm 14:1; 1 Cor 8:9; 1 Thes 5:14-15) necessitated stopping in-person worship. Shock. What does this mean? Do you put everything on hold? Does a church hang on until things change or do we do something more proactive? How do we even approach this challenge? What is the solution? You didn’t plan on that happening nor could you. But it did happen and the consequences of how you responded probably had significant ramifications.

Many pastors and church leaders responded with an emergency plan to replace in-person worship with some kind of digital presence. In-person went virtual. YouTube got a lot of business. Job done. Or was it? Three cheers for those older generation pastors who learned how to record, edit, and upload video. It seemed like no one else would do it. Sincere admiration to those in poorer, ethnic, rural, or internet-challenged congregations who discovered using free conference calls where members could call in for worship and daily devotions. Some deployed their elders to collect the offerings hanging on doorknobs. Others even place printed copies of the service and sermon on front porches. Praise and thanks be to God.

So, what were the results? This may strike you as not a fair question. We cannot determine nor second guess the work of the Spirit working through the Word. The extra distance of delivering it online makes it particularly difficult. We leave the results to God. Some may say “I’m not a fruit inspector” or even quote the old saw, “man plans, and God laughs.” True! Yet does not God require a stewardship of not only the “mysteries of God” (1 Cor 4:1) but also of the church, its mission and ministry? God also requires a stewardship of the priesthood of all believers who are gifted for “works of service (*diakonia*)” (e.g., 1 Pet 2:9; 1 Cor 12; Eph 4:12). Our vocation as Christ’s shepherds and congregational leaders is a stewardship, as Hermann argues in his classic LCMS book *The Chief Steward* printed in 1951.¹ Such stewardship not only requires planning but also wisdom and evaluation and leadership.

While each congregation is different, with numerous elements to shape the outcomes. Some congregations have been more stable, but for most churches the results have not been good. Various research firms and our own experience confirm that churches are not seeing worshippers return to the numbers that used to be

“normal” pre-pandemic, let alone advancing the mission.² A significant portion of people have disengaged. Weaker congregations are considering closing their doors. Pastors are considering resignation or retirement. These are serious problems. The temporary fix of shifting from in-person to digital and back again is not a satisfactory solution. Good stewardship and good leadership require a deeper evaluation and response, which is not a simple fix.

The truth is that for a long time we have been seeing the lagging indicators signaling decline: slowly disengaging members, fewer baptisms and confirmations with shrinking worship attendance. Life events like weddings and funerals are increasingly happening apart from a church or clergy. There is less money to pay the bills and the pastor. There are fewer and aging volunteers. At the same time the general population increases. Such things have been easy to downplay; problems are often not acknowledged. Yet these lagging indicators persist like COVID-19. They point

The temporary fix of shifting from in-person to digital and back again is not a satisfactory solution. Good stewardship and good leadership require a deeper evaluation and response, which is not a simple fix.

to serious problems and deeper issues. Then the pandemic occurs which not only accelerates the downturn of these numbers, but highlights them and screams for attention.

But we are often perplexed as to what to change. Strategic planning can be of value to save money for replacing old HVAC systems, but it can't plan for a pandemic. It's becoming clear that tweaking the annual plan or implementing a temporary fix aren't going to work.

Going deeper: Triple Loop Learning & Asking Questions

So what's the alternative? We need to pursue that deeper evaluation of our stewardship. Dr. Michael Marquardt, author of *Leading with Questions: How Leaders Find the Right Solutions by Knowing What to Ask*, describes it this way. “Through questions, leaders seek to learn not only what directly causes the problem or what solutions may work (which is single-loop learning), but also to seek to discover and learn what might be the underlying causes and solutions (double-loop learning) as well as the culture and mindset that creates these causes and solutions (triple-loop learning).”³

Chris Argyris, a pioneer in organizational learning and professor emeritus of Education and Organizational Behavior at Harvard University, argues that triple-loop learning is necessary if practitioners and organizations are to make informed decisions in rapidly changing and often uncertain circumstances. Yet, “most people define learning too narrowly as mere ‘problem solving.’”⁴ Certainly solving problems is

important but there are times when leaders also need to look at themselves. But this can be a huge challenge for highly skilled professional people who embody the “learning dilemma,” as he calls it. That is, when strategies go wrong such people ignore it and screen out criticism, become defensive, put the blame on others and what they believe is a lack of motivation in the other person. This impedes a leader’s ability to learn and get better, says Argyris. Today we might call this being in denial.

Most churches adjusted to the pandemic by going digital and making more phone calls. This is “single-loop learning” which answers how to fix the problem. In the case of a pandemic, the adjustment was fairly obvious, even though it wasn’t necessarily easy. It got us through the presenting problem. Yet now as we emerge from the shocking challenges of the pandemic, we are faced with the difficult task of needing to deal with the other factors or issues we have been able to overlook or avoid up until now.

So how do we face them as good stewards, in a way that will allow us to bypass our defensiveness, criticism and assumptions and look deeper? We need another helping skill.

Enter Coaching

No, we are not talking about sports coaching that calls the plays and gives advice. And no, we are not talking about coaching that is somehow infused with Buddhist or some other kinds of presuppositions that we must reject. We are instead talking about ancient skills that are incorporated into what is now called coaching. This skill helps people to change or grow without telling them what to do. The International Coaching Federation (ICF), founded in 1995, defines coaching as: “partnering with clients in a thought-provoking and creative process that inspires them to maximize their personal and professional potential.”⁵

This type of coaching is a helping relationship and a way of holding a dialogue that creates a “grace space” where there is high trust and high collaboration as described in the ICF’s fourth core competency of cultivating trust and safety.⁶ In short, it is what Harvard Business professor Amy Edmondson describes as psychological safety.⁷ This is the surprise ingredient that explains why some teams flourish while other teams flounder. It was identified by Google through Project Aristotle which investigated the question.

As the president of the ICF explains, “Organizations that invite coaching in are building that muscle of self-awareness and self-knowing. It’s the realization that sometimes it’s going to get messy, sometimes it’s not going to go right, and that’s ok.”⁸ Then strengthened by that grace space, a team, an organization, especially a church, which knows the grace of Jesus Christ, can get busy discovering underlying causes and pursue real solutions.

The seventh of the eight core competencies of coaching identified by the ICF is especially relevant for going deeper to find root causes. It is titled: “Evokes Awareness.” The definition given is that when coaches evoke awareness they “facilitate client insight and learning by using tools and techniques such as powerful questioning, silence, metaphor or analogy.” Additionally, they cite the following: challenging, asking questions, and helping clients to explore beyond their current thinking, including reframing perspectives.⁹ What this means practically is that good coaching won’t just ask, how can you fix this? Good coaching will help the client to be self-aware regarding their assumptions, desired outcomes, and motivation. Good coaching will explore perspectives from people the client respects, such as valued mentors. For clergy and ministry leaders that would certainly include Jesus and the Scriptures.

So good coaching in no way would diminish or undermine one’s faith. In fact, the coaching process likely will only encourage one’s faith! At the same time coaching does help the client to explore and identify mindsets and assumptions that are not true or relevant and may in fact cause them to be stuck in unproductive thinking and behaviors. Then growing out of that discovery or new awareness, good coaching will help the client to transform this learning and insight into specific actions with accountability.

It is exactly this “evoking awareness” that is the “secret sauce” of coaching. Such awareness rarely if ever comes through mere information sharing or advice. Instead, it happens through the coach asking questions. Then as the coaching client travels this thinking path with the coach, they avoid well-worn neural pathways and draw upon God-given latent wisdom or information they’ve overlooked in their thinking process. Most of us can relate to a time working in the yard or even taking a shower when an insight hit us and we may have even said aloud, “why didn’t I think of that before?” We didn’t because our brains are very efficient and think along well-worn neural pathways and ways to past successes. Then at those times when we are not concentrating, such as when we are at work doing something else, the insight can come to us and be strikingly powerfully in addressing perplexing problems. That awareness is what coaching does through an intentional conversation. Furthermore, since it is not imposed from the outside but emerges from the clients, they are far more likely to own it and take motivated action.

So good coaching in no way would diminish or undermine one’s faith. In fact, the coaching process likely will only encourage one’s faith!

Practical examples

The following are real world examples of flawed assumptions and their default or unthinking behaviors; then comparing them to new insights or awareness. These are not isolated cases but are commonly found among ministry professionals and leaders.

- The flawed assumption and behavior that growing disciples requires a formal class and instruction. The new awareness is that a person's insight is more powerful than another's instruction or advice. This is what Jesus did repeatedly with His disciples as He debriefed what happened with them.
- The flawed assumption by the overworked pastor that he should be everywhere and play a lead role in virtually everything. The unspoken message sent to members is they can be passive, compliant, inactive, and more critical. The new awareness consistent with Ephesians 4, 1 Corinthians 12, 1 Peter 2, and other passages is that the pastor can instead empower and grow disciples through involvement and debriefed experience.
- The flawed assumption that ministry is primarily directed to the membership and happens on the church property. The unintended consequence is an inward or predominantly church-centric focus while avoiding the fields that are "ripe unto harvest" (John 4:35). The new awareness is that the pastor "equip the saints" and deploy them to be "salt and light" in externally focused ministry. The results will be more personal, leadership and conversion growth, with a tsunami of mission and witness in the community. It will also be an antidote to burnout for both pastor and lay people. This external focus also addresses a related flawed assumption that "ministry" (*diakonia*) for lay people is by default serving at the church within the church's positions, programs, structure, and property.
- The flawed assumption by busy ministry leaders that they know what people (members, but especially not yet members) want and need. Then when programs and activities falter, additional assumptions are made to explain why and cast blame. The new awareness is that they need to know the community intimately, including their wants and needs! This will drive church leaders to make friends and listen to people's hopes, dreams, and fears which will shape the church's response. This "business research" should be standard practice for any organization looking to steward resources and initiatives.

- A related assumption is when ministry leaders inaccurately assume why worship attendance is shrinking instead of doing the hard work of seeking out the people of the church and community and listening.
- Ministry leaders inaccurately assume how people are growing or not growing in their faith instead of prioritizing certain marks of discipleship to measure progress, which are then publicly celebrated in praise to God.
- Ministry leaders incorrectly assume just doing what we've always done, but doing it better, is the solution. A related flawed assumption is the goal that the church should strive to be like it once was in its heyday. A new awareness is that this is a different time, so goals and priorities need to shift to bring others closer to Jesus.
- Another flawed assumption is that a lack of money is their greatest problem. The new awareness is that people and their development is their greatest asset.
- Ministry leaders falsely assume they need a silver bullet such as: a younger staff member, different worship form, updated space, signage, etc. The new awareness is to take a sober audit of their vision, goals and actual programs, including attitudes, behaviors, and outcomes and make appropriate adjustments.

The list can certainly go on. Coaching helps one to evaluate and re-evaluate motivation, purpose, and many things and to identify those served. It then clarifies desired outcomes and determines how best to steward and focus resources and every activity for people development and bringing them closer to Christ.

Conclusion

We didn't plan on a pandemic, but it came. What will happen? This is a pregnant time for us to think deeper and more fully consider our stewardship of ministry and the gospel itself. This will happen by seeking to intentionally learn and use skills like coaching to make appropriate changes. It will require a willingness to go beyond the quick fix, to admit shortcomings, try on new assumptions, and begin to try on new behaviors for the sake of Jesus Christ and His mission.

Endnotes

¹ J. E. Hermann, *The Chief Steward, A Manual on Pastoral Leadership* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1951).

² <https://www.barna.com/research/new-sunday-morning-part-2/>

³ Michael Marquardt, *Leading with Questions - how leaders find the right solutions by knowing what to ask*, Jossey Bass, a Wiley imprint (San Francisco: John Wiley and Sons, 2005) Kindle Edition. (Kindle Locations 338-340).

⁴ Chris Argyris, "Teaching Smart People How to Learn," *Harvard Business Review*, May-June 1991.

⁵ <https://coachingfederation.org/about>

⁶ <https://coachingfederation.org/core-competencies>

⁷ There are numerous resources for Amy Edmondson's work available online from her report to her Ted Talk to reviews and opinion pieces about her study. Here are some links:

<https://www.hbs.edu/faculty/Pages/item.aspx?num=54851>

https://www.ted.com/speakers/amy_edmondson

https://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/28/magazine/what-google-learned-from-its-quest-to-build-the-perfect-team.html?_r=0

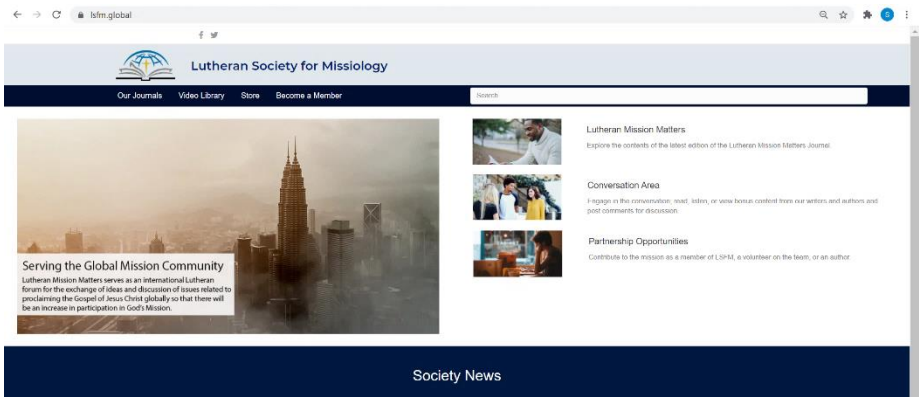
⁸ Quote from International Coaching Federation President, Magdalena Nowicka Mook, from an ICF social media post.

⁹ <https://coachingfederation.org/core-competencies>

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American Lutheran Colleges and the Influenza Epidemic of 1918¹

Mark Granquist

The influenza epidemic of 1918–1919 has been called “America’s Forgotten Pandemic,” although it may well have taken fifty million lives worldwide, 675,000 of them in the United States.² In the midst of a truly global conflict, World War I, this pandemic touched almost every corner of the world and brought influenza into even the most isolated communities. Since this epidemic disproportionately affected young women and men between the ages of twenty and forty, and this population accounted for half the deaths, it is of interest to know how this epidemic affected the American Lutheran colleges.

This influenza was first seen in the United States in the spring of 1918, mainly in military camps and in cities in the northeast, such as Boston and Philadelphia, where it resulted in harsh but often quick outbreaks. America in that year was mobilized for war, and soldiers were on the move across the country and over to Europe, perfect conditions for the spread of an infectious disease like this. Crowded military camps and transports added to the contagion and contributed to the mortality in young adults. Without many effective resources, doctors were unable to do very much, and most of the medical care was provided by nurses. After scattered outbreaks through the summer of 1918, a tidal wave of infections hit during the fall of that year, spiking to highs in October and November, then receding almost as quickly as it arrived. Unlike many influenza outbreaks which are at their worst during the winter and early spring, this outbreak peaked in the fall, and only scattered outbreaks were seen afterward.

By the early twentieth century, American Lutherans had developed an extensive system of academies and colleges to meet the educational needs of their young people and to provide Lutheran denominations with educated pastoral candidates and other leaders.³ The American entry into World War I set off a wave of xenophobia focused on the large waves of immigrants of the prior decades. Lutherans of all ethnic stripes rushed to demonstrate their patriotism, contributing to the war effort and supporting



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the troops. Many young Lutheran men and women joined the armed forces or auxiliaries.

The fact that so many young men were joining (or being drafted into) the armed forces was a significant problem for these American Lutheran colleges, many of which saw a significant decline in enrollment during the 1917–1918 school year, causing major financial hardships. Heading into the 1918–1919 academic year, things promised to be even harder, and it was unclear how much longer the war would last. Such issues meant that many Lutheran colleges were searching for a way to survive during the difficulties of wartime.

The US government established the Student Army Training Corps (SATC) in early 1918 to train young men for the military at colleges and universities around the country. SATC units were established at many of the Lutheran colleges in the fall of 1918. Although many colleges were relieved to have the additional students and the financial support that the program gave, there were a number of troubling issues that were occasioned by the establishment of the SATC programs on campus. This program requisitioned buildings and facilities for its own exclusive use and greatly disrupted the academic life of the community. All the elements of military life, bugles, drilling, and the like, dominated the colleges. Most of the units were commanded by young, outside Army officers who were usually not a part of the Lutheran community, and they were not always so concerned with education.

Another problem was the importation of military culture onto these campuses, including the rough-and-tumble morality of an army camp, quite different from the strict moral regimes that these colleges had observed heretofore. A number of the new students brought on campus were not Lutheran and did not fit well into the traditional campus culture. At Carthage College, Carthage, Illinois, President Hoover later related to his board of directors these problems: “Gambling, profanity, petty thievery, destruction of property and other forms of misconduct were permitted by the officers in charge to an extent that seemed to violate every college ideal which more than a half century of effort had formulated.”⁴

At the beginning of the fall term at the Lutheran colleges in September 1918, the influenza epidemic that had been popping up in military camps and eastern cities was definitely a worry, but it was not generally a present issue on campus. This was soon to change in a major way during the fall, as the influenza invaded the college campuses and peaked dramatically in October and November of that year. Given the fact that the influenza epidemic was seen initially in the military camps, it is reasonable to assume that one of the primary drivers of the epidemic came through the arrival on campus of the SATC students and their military instructor officers. Many of the initial reports of the influenza on campus were among the SATC students. But quickly this epidemic was seen widely throughout the general population, and it affected students, faculty, and staff alike.

At some of the schools, the epidemic began to hit home already in October. At Augustana College, Rock Island, Illinois, two individuals died of the influenza during October: student Walter Grantz, and faculty member Andrew Kempe.⁵ At Luther College student Selmer Knutson died on October 22, although not on campus.⁶ But the epidemic seemed to hit the other campuses hardest in November, just in time for the celebrations of the European armistice on November 11. These celebrations had to be greatly limited by the epidemic and the restrictions that were meant to constrain it. Without definite information, it is hard to know exactly how many students came down with the influenza that fall. The experience of Luther College was typical; out of an enrollment of 241 students in the fall of 1918, 112 students were infected with the influenza, and two nurses and five faculty members caring for these students also developed the disease.⁷ At St. Olaf College the influenza hit later, beginning in November; newly installed President Lars Boe wrote to the students on December 10, 1918: “For a while we considered ourselves fortunate . . . in not having a single case of influenza. But our turn came all of a sudden. Now we have had about one hundred cases and four deaths.”⁸ Most worrisome to Boe was the fact that the epidemic had spread from the SATC barracks and now was to be found “among the girls.” Other campus notices mirrored these reports, saying that the epidemic seemed to develop very quickly, seemingly overnight.

During this fall, the epidemic hit hard in the communities in which these colleges were located and in which their faculty, staff, and many students resided. At Concordia College, Moorhead, Minnesota, seventy-eight people died in the town of Moorhead, but only one student, a young woman “who broke quarantine to go home.”⁹ At Augustana College, Rock Island, the local county declared a ban on all gatherings in public places during that month, as did many other locations.¹⁰ In Decorah, Iowa, and surrounding Winnesheik County (where Luther College was located), there was one quarantine ban after another, as well as other attempts to control the influenza, but still sixty-nine citizens of that county died in the epidemic that fall.¹¹ It is reported that about 195,000 Americans died of the influenza during the month of October 1918.

Lutheran college leaders did what they could to slow the speed and direction in which this epidemic spread. There were no effective medicines against the influenza, so public health measures were the only means of controlling this outbreak. The emphasis was on good hygiene and healthy habits. But these practices, by themselves, were not enough, and all colleges reported that some form of quarantine was instituted during that fall term. This meant confining students to campus and not allowing them to go into the local communities or take trips home. These measures also often meant additional internal forms of quarantine, separating the SATC students from the rest of the college populations and the students who had taken ill from the rest of the campus. A number of these colleges had only limited dormitory spaces, and traditionally some students had boarded at homes in the local

There were no effective medicines against the influenza, so public health measures were the only means of controlling this outbreak.

communities; and their movements had to be restricted, as well. Sometimes the quarantine meant that classes, activities, and sporting events had to be cancelled.

One of the most difficult problems that these quarantines occasioned was the restricting of students to campus, which of course, raised the understandable anxieties of parents who thought that their students should come home instead. At St. Olaf College, President Lars Boe had his hands full “reassuring worried students, and firmly turning down all requests from students and their parents to allow the students to go home.”¹² These decisions were most certainly controversial, but probably the correct ones. The only student at Concordia College, Moorhead, who died was a young woman who left campus to go home, and at Augustana College, Rock Island, Walter Grantz, the only student fatality, died at home after attending the funeral of his brother.¹³ Sometimes the full quarantine could not be observed. At Luther College, when SATC student Selmer Knutson took ill, his parents rushed to the college; the college newspaper reported: “During the last days of his life he was attended by his parents, who did all that loving hands could do to minister to his comfort, and who had the great solace of hearing . . . that he trusted with implicit faith in the presence of his Savior, Jesus Christ.”¹⁴ The influenza struck suddenly and those who died often did so in a matter of days, which obviously greatly heightened the anxieties of all concerned.

These colleges were generally small, tight-knit communities with several hundred students, and the faculty and staff of the colleges were often closely involved in students’ lives, both academic and communal. When the epidemic hit hard on campus, faculty and staff were directly involved in caring for the students. The acknowledged leaders on these campuses were the college presidents, whose roles were quite a bit different than those today. The size of these colleges, and the presence of the presidents on campus meant that these men (often Lutheran pastors) had a close, parental relationship with many of the students. The imposition of quarantine and other restrictions were the decisions of the presidents, who were often closely involved in the care of the students. Of one college president, Lars Boe, it was later said: “Boe ignored the danger to his own health and was seen everywhere on campus, visiting the sick, issuing orders. He and Mr. P.O. Holland [the college treasurer] went to see each patient.”¹⁵

Similar reports are mentioned at other Lutheran colleges. Many faculty members and staff were closely involved in the care of the students who had become ill.

The epidemic and the quarantine restrictions, along with the disruptions of the SATC units on campus, meant that the normal rhythms and activities on campus were upended. Still, students attempted to make the best of things and to carry on as best as possible. Sports activities, especially football, were limited or canceled due to travel restrictions. The religious character of these colleges meant that religious organizations (Luther League, the Lutheran Brotherhood of America, the YMCA, and other student mission societies) were active on campus. Student organizations mobilized to assist in the war effort and in particular to provide services to the SATC units on campus. At Muhlenberg College, Allentown, Pennsylvania, the YMCA and

the Lutheran Brotherhood of America provided materials and entertainment for the cadets, and the college provided regular religious services.¹⁶ At Bethany College, a “Soldier’s Club” was set up in a property adjacent to the college campus.¹⁷ At Gettysburg College, a special “song fest,” was organized in the Chapel on October 26, 1918. The college newspaper reported: “The men entered into the singing with a wonderful spirit. The singing not only provided recreation for the men but also increases their range of voice thus making them more able to give commands as men should give them.”¹⁸ Special activities, such as the yearly observances of the founding of the college, and the celebration of the Armistice that ended the First World War on November 11 were either cancelled or were held out-of-doors. The successful end of the war was something to be celebrated, to be sure, although the influenza epidemic certainly muted these activities.

The most difficult part of this fall most certainly were the deaths that occurred among the students and faculty of these colleges. In such tight-knit communities of young adults, epidemics and sudden death of this variety can be a real shock, and the restrictions of the quarantines surely made conditions even more difficult. In particular, funerals and memorial services were, though necessary, difficult to arrange. At Luther College, following the death of Selmer Knutson, a memorial service was conducted outside on the steps leading to one of the college buildings. The college newspaper reported, “The S.A.T.C. and cadet corps escorted the body to the College entrance, not being able to proceed farther on account of the quarantine, which was then in force.”¹⁹ At Augustana College, Rock Island, the funeral of faculty member Andrew Kempe was held outdoors in mid-October on the front steps of the library building.²⁰ At St. Olaf College, long-time staff member Gertrude Hilleboe recounted many years later:

Another picture indelibly etched on one’s mind from those days is of a flag-draped coffin in a hearse just outside the Chapel (we were not allowed to hold any funeral services in the building), a five-minute sermonette and prayer by President Boe, the slow descent to the foot of the Hill accompanied by the Honor Guard, and then taps.²¹

In memorializing a Gettysburg College student who died during the epidemic, a writer in the college newspaper expressed sorrow and shock at the occurrence: “the mind is shocked when a life in the fullest vigor and activity is suddenly cut off and a future of valuable productiveness is apparently wasted.”²² Though the numbers of actual deaths reported on these campuses were relatively small (the largest number reported was that of four students at St. Olaf College²³), one can imagine that many of those who had been sick and survived saw this as a very sobering experience.

And then by the end of 1918, the war, the quarantine restrictions, and the epidemic itself came to an end, almost as quickly as they had arrived. On all these campuses, the SATC units were disbanded during November and December 1918, and the campuses began to revert to their former configurations. The lifting of quarantines happened at different times, depending on the course of the epidemic on campus. There seemed a palpable sense of release bordering on giddiness at the end of the war

and the seeming end of the epidemic, even as the toll of these events was still in the hearts and minds of many. The influenza epidemic that had peaked so dramatically during the fall of 1918 receded quickly, although there were still localized outbreaks in 1919.

There was a great anticipation of returning to “normal” once the colleges resumed their activities in early 1919. Yet whether the effect of the epidemic, the war, or both, there was also a common realization that things had changed, and their colleges had changed with them. College officials and historians have commented on the new spirit on their various campus, often in conjunction with the return of demobilized soldiers to the campuses. How long this lasted and how prevalent it was is beyond the scope of this study, but it seems almost certain that the fall of 1918 changed the American Lutheran colleges in important ways. They had risen to meet the twin challenges of war and epidemic and had survived.

With historical study it is often difficult to isolate cause and effect, and especially how a historical event effected subsequent history. Such is the case with the influenza epidemic of 1918. Indeed, one of the striking elements of this epidemic is the fact that it came and went so quickly, and it would seem not to have had a major effect on subsequent Lutheran history. One can scan the Lutheran periodicals for the several years after 1918, and rarely ever encounter any searching examination of the events of 1918 or their lingering aftermath. But this is not to say that the epidemic had no effects; indeed, the death of so many people, so many of whom were in the prime of life, cannot but have an effect. When this author was developing this article, a colleague mentioned to him that her mother had been born in the fall of 1918, in the midst of the crisis. This colleague suggested that her mother always carried this event with her, and it colored the way she lived her entire life.

One wonders how those young Lutheran women and men on these college campuses in the fall of 1918 were affected by this event – the quarantines, the loss of classmates, and other traumas. What we do know is that this generation of Lutherans produced a number of great missionaries who brought the gospel of Jesus Christ to peoples around the world before and after World War II. They had a seriousness to them, a focus, and a vision for service to the gospel. Without digging deeply into their life stories would be difficult to say what role the epidemic played in their individual, personal ministries. But such a brush with human mortality at the time of young adulthood is often formative, and it

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must be that the events of 1918 had an important impact on them. What we do know for sure is that after 1918, American Lutherans “stepped up to the plate” to take

responsibility for Lutheran missions worldwide, especially to take the place of European mission societies that were no longer able to support their mission stations after World War I. War and epidemic have a way of focusing one's mind and sharpening one's vocation, and certainly these events must have shaped a generation of young leaders.

Endnotes

¹ This article is an abridgement of a longer article, first published in the *Journal of the Lutheran Historical Conference*, vol. 9, 2019, 135–152, and used by permission.

² For this history in the United States, see Alfred W. Crosby, *America's Forgotten Pandemic: The Influenza of 1918*. 2nd ed. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003). This epidemic has sometimes been referred to as the "Spanish flu," although there is no reason to suppose that it originated in Spain.

³ For a history of these educational institutions, see Richard Solberg, *Lutheran Higher Education in North America* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1985).

⁴ Quoted in William Carl Spielman, *The Diamond Jubilee History of Carthage College, 1870–1945* (Carthage IL: Carthage College Historical Society, 1945), 106.

⁵ Jamie Nelson, "1918 at Augustana: Soldiers and flu come and go." Accessed at www.augustana.edu/about-us/sesquicentennial/1918-at-augustana

⁶ "Selmer Alfred Knutson," *College Chips*, 35 (7), October 1918.

⁷ Nick Kelley, "Pandemic Influenza: Insights from the Past, Thoughts for the Future," *Agora* 19 (2), Spring 2007, 9.

⁸ Lars Boe, "To the St. Olaf Students," *Manitou Messenger*, 32 (5), December 10, 1918, 1.

⁹ Carroll Engelhardt, *On Firm Foundation Grounded: The First Century of Concordia College, 1891–1991*. (Moorhead, Minnesota: Concordia College, 1991), 21.

¹⁰ Nelson.

¹¹ Kelley, 8.

¹² Joseph M. Shaw, *History of St. Olaf College, 1874–1974*. (Northfield, MN: St. Olaf College Press, 1974), 266.

¹³ Engelhardt, 21, and Nelson. In a tragic turn, Grantz and his three siblings all died of the influenza that fall.

¹⁴ "Selmer Alfred Knutson"

¹⁵ Shaw, 266.

¹⁶ "What the Lutheran Church Is Doing for the Boys at Muhlenberg" and "Religious Service Held at Muhlenberg Unit," *Muhlenberg Weekly*, 37 (2) October 30, 1918, 5.

¹⁷ Emroy Lindquist, *Bethany in Kansas: The History of a College*. (Lindsborg, Kansas: Bethany College, 1975), 51.

¹⁸ "Recreation for the S.A.T.C." *The Gettysburgian*, Wednesday, November 13, 1918. Given what is now known about the aerosol transmission of viruses, in retrospect, a song fest may not have been the best idea.

¹⁹ "Selmer Alfred Knutson."

²⁰ Nelson.

²¹ "Interview with Gertrude M. Hilleboe, July 1, 1970," in Shaw, 266.

²² "Health Provisions," *The Gettysburgian*, Wednesday, November 13, 1918.

²³ "Four St. Olaf Men Succumb to the Flu," *Manitou Messenger*, 32 (5), December 10, 1918, 1.

How Do We Get Out of the Corona Crisis and What Remains?

Markus Nietzsche

This article was a Talk given on June 15th, 2021, at the Pastors Convention of the Independent Evangelical Lutheran Church (SELK).

Before I venture into addressing the subject of the Pastors Convention, I would like to express my gratitude:

a. During the Corona pandemic (and from a global perspective it is far from over) we are carried by the promise of the Lord Jesus Christ: “See, I am with you every day, until the end of the world!” This “every day” also includes all those days of which we say with Ecclesiastes 12:1, “I have no pleasure in them!” The glorious confidence that Jesus Christ gives us through His Word sustains you and me in days that we deem as having almost no pleasure. Praise and thanks be to God!

b. Another word of thanks goes to our congregation members who have, with cordial solidarity and faithful intercession, brought us before God in prayers on our behalf in all tasks and areas of responsibility in these trying times.

c. And a thank you must also be said for all collegiality experienced in the church, the church districts, and among our colleagues. This included, the spontaneous greeting by email, the surprise phone call, the collegial conversation via Zoom, the one-on-one exchanges, the unexpected gift by mail and others. We have not yet seen the end of the pandemic; but speaking on the topic “What remains?” this must be said above all else: Thankfulness remains!

We have not yet seen the end of the pandemic; but speaking on the topic “What remains?” this must be said above all else: Thankfulness remains!



Rev. Markus Nietzsche has served as Superintendent of the Lower-Saxony West church district of the SELK since 2018. Pastor Nietzsche has worked as an educator and missionary since 1994 and has founded and co-founded churches and Lutheran schools in Germany. He has held teaching positions at the Lutheran Theological College at Oberursel at the Lutheran Theological Seminary in Pretoria-Tshwane and at the Lutheran Institute in Southeast Asia in Bangkok, Thailand. Pastor Nietzsche writes essays, reviews, sermons, devotions and other resources for a variety of publications.

In my talk, I'd like to focus on ways out of the pandemic —thinking ahead into a “new” normality. I am not one of those who would like to go back to the past or “keep going on” as before. I am offering some reflections in the hope of encouraging further collegial discussions. The ideas are provisional in nature and certainly also to be regarded as incomplete. My approach is this: I'll describe something and then ask the question, “What remains?” followed by a statement. Overall, what I have to say has probably been said many times before. So let us start with “What remains?” The need to pay attention to God's work through the Holy Spirit in His Word and to have circumspect discussions with one another, with ample time for the exchange and understanding of our various positions.

On the 12th of March 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the spread of the Coronavirus to be a pandemic. In our indispensable contemporaneity with the society surrounding the church, this has a considerable effect on church life. However, the supposition in dealing with the pandemic is that the SELK and its congregations are affected by the pandemic to very different degrees. The drastic restrictions on church life and social contacts, up to and including the closure of church buildings due to measures taken by the government, were experienced by many as traumatizing. Let us not avoid conversations about exactly “what the virus did to us.” Calling things by their names helps; it may be helpful to differentiate clearly between aspiration and reality. All the quite opposite expectations must be sorted and processed afterwards - spiritually, of course, as well as collegially. An initial answer to the question at hand is therefore: We learn anew to differentiate between theological expectations and experienced reality. What remains after the pandemic? Claims and expectations? Or do we, as a church, develop the ambition to set out into unexplored spiritual territory? Let us adopt and embrace the prayer of the church during all times of pandemic, catastrophes, wars, as well as sunny, peaceful days and hours, and pray: “Lord, renew your church and begin with me!”

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As a church, we have been given an abundance of creative ideas. I don't think one can move forward without giving thanks. Thank you for your service in all faithfulness and taking into consideration the most diverse talents and all diversity in the unity given to us by Christ, for the cooperation and opportunities to experience and live faith.

Concerning the diversity in unity, I want to mention a few examples in our church that do not claim to be complete but demonstrate a tireless – daily (sic!) commitment, in the period from April to May 2020:

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- a. Home devotions and home worship services in a variety of media, for instance handing out our written sermons as well as devotional calendars, or delivering these via MP3, video, Zoom, or Skype
- b. Telephone devotions and call-in telephone church services, even with church coffee via phone
- c. “*Blütenlese-Gottesdienst*” [“florilegium (composite) worship services”, i.e., with several worship leaders and churches interacting] to produce a digital offering by one of our districts for the present, as well as the foreseeable future
- d. Various divine service formats in an abbreviated form wherever there was an opportunity to celebrate in public
- e. Family and children's services via digital media
- f. Live-stream church services
- g. Zoom worship service with participants from the local church district and beyond
- h. Instagram posts with short devotions, thoughts for the day, and prayers.

Given that religious freedom to hold public worship services and the so-called “basic rights” of the church [a special reserved legal right for churches in Germany] are in my opinion very high and, indeed, very precious, the question is, however: How do we remain sensitive to our surroundings and to the possible existential fears of some of our own community members?

How do we remain sensitive to our surroundings and to the possible existential fears of some of our own community members?

We have become aware again of the importance of encounters and worship on site, especially where our church members live widely scattered in the diaspora and celebrate divine services in one town and place on certain Sundays and experience fellowship. (I want to stress it a bit: The role of church coffee! and sharing meals and eating together!). We are a church in the diaspora. Let’s face it, fellowship is a necessity for our church life and our church’s existence!

In this context, I would like to let the signs of experienced pastoral care during the pandemic shine again. In addition to the church’s printed newsletter and newsletters via email, SMS, or WhatsApp, even old-fashioned postcards were used again during the pandemic, after abandoning this form of communication years ago. Church members reported how important these signs of solidarity and closeness were and are to them—even though one person stated: “You know, Pastor, I don’t read everything you send out, but I find these regular letters, newsletters, etc. very

important, helpful and valuable.” Of course, there is also other, negative feedback: “It’s too much. You are overdoing it!” What remains? The autonomy experienced and lived in different congregations of our church. What else remains? The appreciation for continuities in congregational and church life.

The media presence on the part of almost every congregation has increased. This has increasingly led to the fact that the worship services are suddenly perceived as unlimited in terms of space and time. Two examples: the above mentioned “*Blütenlese*” (composite) worship services are now celebrated all over the world; Zoom church services and events still have a local flavor but are celebrated by people from a geographical distance. New forms of worship, fellowship, and communication are being discovered in church. Many services or duties that were offered at the beginning of the pandemic (mainly delivered by pastors) were gradually withdrawn in the past year. The tenor of the statements in this regard usually is this: “I can’t manage to go two ways,” meaning live and public services as well as digital formats. Or did they *e silentio* become disillusioned that their diverse offerings were not as much in demand as some may have expected?

New places for delivering worship services (even within a church building) were explored. Suddenly, the interior design of the church has become an issue. This also applies to churches that have their doors open seven days a week, where tourists and pilgrims stop by and are received as guests. The “open air” events seem to be accompanied by a certain latitude and freedom, which is reflected in more entertaining sermons and a streamlined worship service. Customary and well-known liturgical forms were either augmented or compressed. What remains? A new exploration of liturgical essentials, church interior design, and worship aesthetics.

What remains? A new exploration of liturgical essentials, church interior design, and worship aesthetics.

Let us fleetingly touch on the topic of church music, choir rehearsals, and instrumental choirs, and singing in church. In several SELK congregations the loss of communal singing was perceived as the greatest limitation during the pandemic. There were congregations where many events could continue almost as usual, whereas in others everything came to a standstill for a long time. A longing for the traditional, familiar, rich musical offering will, in my opinion, lead to great disappointment. In this context, I also believe that things that no longer work, or worked only to a limited extent in parishes and church districts before the pandemic, will not improve after the pandemic. Even though many would like to start anew and present new, diverse, and ambitious offerings, these sentiments, viewed in the light of day should be treated with caution; much of that will remain unsuccessful. Perhaps, as a small, manageable church, we will rediscover that we cannot and do not have to cover everything. What remains? The disillusionment with events and groups that will no longer be possible.

Topics that will become more relevant as we live with the Coronavirus are these: missing church services especially for children; VBS and confirmation classes; youth groups and camps that did not take place at all, in certain places not for months, some not even to this very day. If one should mention one age group where there are significant social losses, it is the children and especially young people between 16 and 23 years of age. The isolation and clearly perceptible loneliness imposed on them will have to be considered and dealt with in the long term. What remains? The challenge of focusing specifically on therapeutic and pastoral support, especially for young people—not to mention the postponed weddings, baptisms, confirmations, 'round' birthdays and many other things in congregational life! What about the pent-up grief over burial rituals that could not be performed during the pandemic? What remains? The grief and loss of what did not happen during the pandemic and the challenge of facing it in everyday pastoral care.

What remains? The grief and loss of what did not happen during the pandemic and the challenge of facing it in everyday pastoral care.

It is an old experience that in stressful situations it is important to find ways where the pent-up stress and anger can vent, where there are 'valves' to let off steam. I can foresee, and we are already experiencing, how old fundamentalist sentiments, with which one comes into contact in pastoral care, are rekindled. We will not only have to deal with opponents of all innovations in the future, but now lateral thinkers, vaccine opponents, and radicalized people are creating a new stress factor. There are new waves of fundamentalism to be expected here. Sure, freedom of conscience and freedom of expression must be valued and maintained, but also freedom in matters of faith. Real caring can also mean resisting the fundamentalist currents of our day.

In the future, we will need confession, supervision, and mutual support in clerical conversations to be able to do our service professionally in the *una sancta*. Our God has endowed us with senses, reason, and intellect and we are allowed to use them, and God certainly does not expect us to fail. What remains? The professional handling of fundamentalist sentiments of whatever kind and the self-care on the part of the pastor.

So-called megatrends develop slowly, but they have an even more powerful effect on all levels of society and influence our “indispensable contemporaneity” as the church in our society. That is why it is worth looking beyond one's own nose, a look that the German *Zukunftsinstitut* makes possible. The *ZI* has been drawing attention to the possibility of a global pandemic (amongst other things) for a good ten years. I'll mention just a few keywords:

- The relationship between local and global is being rebalanced. An increase in local, national, and regional autonomy is to be expected, a new balance between cosmopolitanism and a sense of homeland. We can ask ourselves how this will affect our church-structures.

- The pandemic has generalized the active use of digital offerings of all kinds. Since Coronavirus we have, more than ever before, been living in a real-digital world in which the strict separation between analog and virtual is becoming completely obsolete. Are we on our way to a hybrid future? And also, in church?
- The great shift in values that is taking place around individualization has also been driven by the pandemic. The previous individualism has made way for a new “we-culture,” with the desire for solidarity, belonging, and social resonance. It’s not just about relationships with other people, but also resonance with nature and the things that surround us.

The pandemic triggered a megatrend surge. The SELK should utilize this to its full advantage. Sustainable digital offerings from the SELK (on an easily accessible platform) would be an opportunity to reach completely different layers of the population during this time, autonomous, and new we-cultures. Both the real encounters and the digital formats of congregational services can complement each other well. We might reflect on where we could get the strength to serve both areas and where we want to set priorities.

As part of the *una sancta*, we must be the bearers of the word of reconciliation and redemption through Jesus Christ, even in the middle of a pandemic. There will always be people who pray and do what is right, while waiting hopefully for God’s time. In this community we are called on to provide a way into the future, God’s future, and walk and talk very confidently. Because there are such people during the ongoing pandemic who pray to God—also for us as workers in the church—people who stand up for justice and approach it aggressively; at the same time, it is very calming for us as the church to wait for God’s time. We seek our way towards the future with and post-Corona. The SELK is being asked: How do we get out of the Corona crisis and what remains? The answer is: the actual work is still ahead of us.

There will always be people who pray and do what is right, while waiting hopefully for God’s time. In this community we are called on to provide a way into the future, God’s future, and walk and talk very confidently.

As pastor/superintendent, I am starting where our congregation/our church district finds itself to be, rather than how I would like it to be. Dreams, goodbye! To accept things as they are, in my opinion, is not a weakness or nakedness. But it doesn’t alter my perspective to change things that can be changed, according to our ideals. If we want to change something, we should start where we are now.

[I would like to thank Klaudia Ringelmann, Pretoria, South Africa, for her help in translating my article, which was originally given in German, into English.]

In Such a Time as This: Surviving with COVID-19

D. Christudas

Hear this, you elders; give ear, all inhabitants of the land! Has such a thing happened in your days, or in the days of your fathers? Tell your children of it, and let your children tell their children, and their children to another generation.
(Joel 1:2-3)

We are passing through a very strange and extraordinary time—the global pandemic of COVID-19, a once-in-a-century global health crisis. It has caused unparalleled vulnerability. This invisible enemy, the corona virus, is adversely affecting all spheres of life on our planet. It has thrown us into experiences of unbearable pain and agony. I myself, together with my colleagues, students, their family members, along with millions of others, were greatly impacted by this dangerous disaster. We helplessly watched the loss of several precious lives from our own families and the circle of close friends. It has been more than a pandemic for us. According to the conspiracy theory it is a *plandemic*.¹ Some have called it a *Planetdemic*.

Every season of trials may serve as a test of governance, and as the test of our competence. Much more than a crisis, this pandemic leaves behind some outstanding residues and remnants. Extraordinary communities are emerging through disasters. The pre-COVID-19 world is gone, replaced by a “new normal.” The new landscape calls for both flexibility and adaptation, embracing new ways of doing things and of being church. Churches must adapt; they must ask themselves questions about the implications for being church in this “new normal” context. The church may understand that this is a once-in-a-century opportunity to shape the world and the



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church the way God wants them to be. This article is an attempt to share some of the observations and reflections about the mission and ministry of the church during this new normal period.

Lamentations: People's and God's

In times of crisis, we often find it easier to identify with the psalmist, “I hear the whispering of many—terror on every side!” (Ps 31:13). We, too, keep hearing of the “terror on every side,” due to the corona-virus pandemic. “Those who see me on the street flee from me” (Ps 31:11).

“Be gracious to me, O LORD, for I am languishing;” Psalm 6 prays, “Heal me, O LORD, for my bones are troubled. My soul also is greatly troubled.” “Why, O LORD, do you stand far away?” asks Psalm 10 sadly. “Why do you hide yourself in time of trouble?” And so, it goes on: “How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?” (Ps 13:1). And such cries are more terrifying when we hear Jesus Himself quoting Psalm 22 in His agony on the cross, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

The mystery of the biblical story is that *God also laments*. Some Christians like to think of God as above all that, knowing everything, in charge of everything, calm and unaffected by the troubles in this world. That is not the picture we get in the Bible. God was grieved to His heart, over the violent wickedness of His human creatures. He was overwhelmed when His own bride, the people of Israel, turned away from Him. And when God came back to His people in the person of Jesus Christ, the Son of God wept at the tomb of His friend Lazarus. The Bible portrays God as one who weeps in the human tragedies. St. Paul speaks of the Holy Spirit as *groaning* within us, as we ourselves groan with the pain of the whole creation.

The ancient doctrine of the Trinity teaches us to recognize the One God in the tears of Jesus and the anguish of the Spirit. We are not able to understand properly God's weeping still today. All biblical pandemics were predicted earlier; God gave warnings to people to correct their ways. Is it possible that in the present pandemic there were no such warnings, or is it that people were unprepared to listen? God knows all there is to know. That means God's knowledge is total. In addition to infinite understanding, God claims to be the “Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end” (Rev 22:13). This implies that He has complete knowledge of all things, past, present, and future and has no need to learn from anybody else. He already knows how everything will end. Yes, God is in control of everything, and He is omnipotent. That He knows everything does not mean that He predestined everything.

It is not part of the Christian vocation, then, to be able to explain what is happening and why it is happening. We are not capable of understanding all the mysterious ways of God. That kind of understanding is not even needed. In fact, it *is* part of the Christian vocation *not to be able* to explain—and to lament instead. As the Spirit laments within us, so we ourselves lament. Even in our self-isolation, the presence and healing love of God can dwell. And out of that can emerge new possibilities, new acts of kindness, new scientific understanding, new hope, and new wisdom for the leaders.

Age of the New Normal

The COVID-19 pandemic made tremendous changes in the world. It has created a historical divide or critical separation of our lives as being pre-COVID or post-COVID. We are not in a post-COVID yet; we are with COVID, in a “COVIDian age.” Things are not yet normal. This period will continue indecisively. We need to have a new lifestyle to cope with COVID. We are in a new normal period. *Normality* will not have the same definition as before. Now we are faced with revisiting the definition of *normal*. New normal is a description of the current situation and the social customs, etc., that is different from what has been experienced or done before but is expected to become usual or typical.

The new normal situation requires the church to renew its vision, theology, and mission. The ministry of Jesus Christ was a new normal, preparing people as a kingdom community over and against the discourse of massive oppression by both the Roman Empire and Jewish religious structures. Here church need to continue its corrective witnessing in a corruptive world. In all possibility, the pandemic might leave behind a lot of residual leftovers apart from present calamities that are mostly reported by media. In the post-pandemic era, we are going to meet different lasting impacts.

New Ecclesiological Vision

In many parts of the world all religious gatherings were banned, and churches were closed due to the lock down and social distancing policy. The closure of churches during the COVID-19 outbreak and lockdown has forced Christian churches to “do church” differently and to re-imagine the future of the church. No more traditional worship was taking place. The elderly people had to be away from the churches even on Sundays. Church functions were limited with strict COVID Protocol. This virus is forcing us to re-imagine our understanding about the church. As William Dreyer observes, “The actual crisis of the church is not only to be found in external circumstances and influences but is primarily a question of the church not being able to ‘be church’.”² This precisely is the crisis the church is facing now with an invisible virus. Is the church being a mere building to close and open? Are worship services being the essential service and the ultimate expression of diakonia? The churches do

not need to *open* because churches never should be *closed* in the first place. The church is *ecclesia*, a community of the faithful, a people's assembly. *Going to the church* differs from *being* the church. In these days church is regaining its meaning not as an institution but as people. How much money is spent to construct huge church buildings that most of the time are not in use. The new coronavirus places a challenge on the institutional understanding of the church. Here we are challenged to revisit our understanding of the invisible church:

The invisible church (ecclesia invisible) is composed of all those who have been reached by the Word of God and have responded in faith, wherever they may be. According to Luther this is the true church. It has no head other than Christ. The risen Christ operates through the Word in the power of the Spirit. No human being can grant or deny access to this fellowship. The power of the new life of Christ flows into the members and through the members into the world.³

While remaining true to the classic marks of the church (one, holy, catholic, apostolic), we are now forced to focus on the missional nature of the church. God's mission comes first, then the church. As Bevans and Schroeder remind us: "mission . . . is prior to the church and is constitutive of its very existence" and then "as mission takes shape so does the Church."⁴ COVID-19 also calls us to reimagine the idea of church as community. The call to community is central to the Christian faith and practice. The very notion of community is established in the Godhead; God is community (Trinity), and the church (ekklesia) refers to a community whether it is a local church, a citywide church, or the universal church.

The church is not primarily a place of refuge, but a community of people on pilgrimage.

God works with community and whenever God does work with individuals, he sends them right back into community. The future church will be decided by relationships. The church will increasingly exist as a community rather than a meeting place once-a-week. A missionary church is relational because it is a community of faith, and it is governed by a "relational ecclesiology." The church is not primarily a place of refuge, but a community of people on pilgrimage.

Pastors once encouraged the worshippers to "come to church" and made members feel guilty if they were not attending church. Now the plea is "please join us on . . . such electronic platform." Another welcome sign is the move from organized artificial performance in sacred buildings to returning to the essence of the church, the homes; that is, a church in each home. The electronic medium has created opportunities for

people to “wander” and experiment. People who travel can easily church shop these days. On television, channel flipping has become a new norm for seekers looking for spiritual empowerment. The elderly Christians who are mostly locked in homes are enjoying the charismatic channels one by one and nowadays they are somewhat hooked on it. They have even started to criticize the mainline churches and their traditional way of liturgical worship. Modern Christian youths are also very happy with the change. They need not go to church, but they can attend digital worship as they like, while sitting at the dining table with their breakfast. How this shift is going to affect the future church is uncertain. However, people realize that they can have access to the living God without an institutionalized church. This is a welcome change. This new ecclesiology is a gift of this season.

New Theological Perspective

In this era of crisis, we are trying to understand our faith through the lens of the pandemic and vice versa. Human struggles help us understand the deeper meaning of the faith we believe, teach, and confess. In a crisis we don't wait for God to act, but we move ahead with the hope which God has put in us. People ask why a crisis happens. Others are asking, “where is God in all this?” For them there is no God. If there is a loving and caring God, why does he allow this type of disaster to happen? Others, including some Christians, have no doubt that God is punishing the world for the cruel sins like abortion and for homosexuality and the like. Is God punishing all people this way because of such sins some people commit? Asking such type of questions is meaningless. Is God so far removed from the world? As Martha and Mary said: “*Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died*” (Jn 11:21, 32). Others quote 1 Pt 4:17 and say, “*For it is time for judgment to begin at the household of God.*”

God is mysteriously hidden; but He continues to reveal Himself in the suffering servant, Jesus Christ. Those who preach a theology of glory and advocate the gospel of prosperity are now hiding behind the curtain. They do not have a clear answer for such a crisis as the pandemic. It is time for us to look deeply into the theology of the cross. And it is also the time to distinguish God's proper work and His alien work. We have no social distancing from Jesus Christ upon whom we lay our foundation (1 Cor 3:11). For none can lay a new foundation other than that which is laid in Jesus Christ. This is the theology which the natural person cannot accept because it looks like nonsense to him. These things are of the spirit of God. Spiritual people evaluate everything with the wisdom of God. They are subject to no one else (1 Cor 2:14–15),

With the psalmist we plead, “*But I trust in you, O LORD. . . My times are in your hand; rescue me from the hand of my enemies*” (Ps 31:15). An ancient Chinese saying (from Sun Tzu, in *The Art of War*) explains the key to victory against any enemy: “*If you know the enemy and know yourself, you need not fear the result of a hundred*

battles.” By knowing our enemy and knowing ourselves as Christians we can respond to any crisis intelligently and appropriately as the people of God.

How do we approach the current crisis? The apostle Paul was in a dark, perhaps wet and dirty, prison cell. Look at Paul’s letter to the Colossian church. Even during struggles he was thankful to God that the gospel was advancing (Col 1:3–8). From a prison, the great apostle wrote, “*For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain*” (Phil 1:21). A Christ-centered and gospel-centered life is undisturbed, but joyful, and sees each day as an opportunity to live to the glory of God. Coronavirus has created for us a new awareness of a God who is gracious and compassionate.

In such a time as this, a new theological awareness about the theology of mission of the church also needs to be noted. COVID-19 has the added opportunities for making the church more accessible, not only to those who are its members, but to all people. COVID-19 has opened the eyes of the churches to the realities of the sufferings in the world and moved churches to orient ministries towards the ideals of the kingdom of God rather than the narrow focus of the church on itself. In India, the COVID-19 infections and related deaths rapidly increased, many millions of people have lost jobs, thousands of businesses have closed or are going bankrupt, and millions of people are starving. What is the mission of the church in such a context? It is encouraging to hear inspirational stories of how many churches, against all the challenges of the COVID-19 lockdown rules, are supplying food, counselling, prayers, and other kinds of ministries to the suffering masses. In word and deed, they hold out hope and peace in these troubled and difficult times. The church needs to show a faithful presence among the ordinary, common people. Faithful presence means, taking our bodies, our location, and our community very seriously, as seriously as God in Christ took them. Faithful presence invites us to act on the belief that God is giving us what we need to be formed as disciples within our location. Faithful presence shows a specific kind of existence in all the places that Christians find themselves—and in such a way that it upholds the honesty and harmony of Christian faith.

The church affirms its integrity and faithfulness to the Gospel when it takes up the struggles and sufferings of the world, when it favors the poor, and when it joins with God in turning to the world to establish justice, peace, and the fullness of life for all people and creation. David Bosch reminds us that mission is God’s “yes” to the world “submitted in the conviction that there is continuity between the reign of God, the mission of the church, and justice, peace, and wholeness in society, and that salvation also has to do with what happens to people in this world.”⁵

During this time of COVID-19, churches should become centers for solidarity, networks of compassion, empathy, healing, and emotional support in the face of sickness, fear, pain, and hunger. Against this background, Christian theology must be

intimately connected with Christian life, and the church must share the sufferings of this present time with the whole creation. In every age it must find its Christian identity afresh.

The church must restore the power to be a powerhouse of love, peace, and unity among believers. The interconnected and interdependent character of the church as the body of Christ enables it to have deep solidarity with the victims in all situations. Once again the church has become the salt and light of the earth. The church must raise its prophetic voice and speak against the conventional norms and social practices that work against the plan of God for people's lives.

The virus also helps us to cross over the rigid denominational boundaries. In a crisis like the pandemic, the churches' material resources and premises such as auditoriums, schools, colleges, hostels were converted as temporary hospitals and quarantine centers for the use of the public. Most of the churches opened community kitchens. Church became a public place and were able to do public witness. Instead of waiting for people to come to the church, the church began to move towards people. This new approach is really a notable change.

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New Perspective in Ministry

Extraordinary situations demand extraordinary imaginations and initiatives. Christian ministers are reimagining their vocation in contextually relevant ways that could enable battling COVID-19 and its effects in our communities and congregational life. How one can be a relevant Christian minister in this context? Practically, pastors began to use community kitchens as their pulpit, sick beds as their altar, started "worship on wheels" meeting people outside the church buildings, offering nurture and pastoral care through digital alternatives. Dramas and divine comedies in the name of God were stopped. Spiritual consumerism, ecstasy, and the like have fallen into their lowest ebb. Festivals, pilgrimages, and other meaningless ceremonies were stopped at least temporarily. A new way opened to have a renewed, personal relationship directly with God. Intermediaries like faith healers, miracle workers, and convention preachers are going out of business. COVID-19 has resulted in the strengthening of the concept of the priesthood of all believers. God in Jesus Christ has become more personal and meaningful for most Christians.

Conclusion

The coronavirus pandemic has forced churches into shifting and rethinking some of their long-held theological views and practices. The virus has provided a window of opportunity to reimagine a new theology for the church, which is not focused on institutionalism, structure, rules, and rites but being God's transforming presence in the world.

The closure of churches during the coronavirus pandemic has forced churches to function in new ways, remaining open to the world and being church, (often in ways against which we have formerly battled). COVID-19 has reaffirmed that the church does not live within walls; it is the people of God, who, in the power of the Holy Spirit, live and long for God's reign in the world. The kingdom or reign of God is the primary missional perspective of the church as we continue to pray for and work towards God's justice, peace, righteousness, and love on earth. The church is a sign, symbol, and pointer to that kingdom as it is called out of the world and sent into the world to be the presence of God. In this way it will become manifest that the church not only proclaims the gospel, but it is also part of the Good News. What the coronavirus has done is to call the church and the world to trust in God alone.

Endnotes

¹ Undeniably, there are people who believe it is the worst human-made disaster.

² Wim A Dreyer, "The Real Crisis of the Church," *Theological Studies* 7(3), 2015,1.

³ Klaus Nuernberger, *Martin Luther's Message for Us Today* (Pietermaritzburg, South Africa: Cluster Publications, 2005), 132.

⁴ Stephen B. Bevans & Roger P. Schroeder, *Constants in Context: A Theology for Mission Today*, (New York: Orbis Books, 2004), 13.

⁵ David Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (New York: Orbis Books, 1991), 11.

Independence and Resistance of the Churches

Werner Klän

Thoughts on the Independent Evangelical Lutheran Church in times of COVID-19.

The Independent Evangelical Lutheran Church (SELK) is an independent church. That is, it is not a part of the system of territorial churches that after 1919 replaced the “state church” system, which reflected the efforts in the Reformation and post-Reformation periods to unify the people of one political territory in one church.¹ In the 19th century in particular, these effort resulted in forming “united” churches out of thitherto Lutheran and reformed church bodies, the apex of this process being the “Prussian Union” of 1817. When taking responsibility for maintaining SELK as an independent church, the church body no longer wanted to have the state and its state-church authorities dictate matters of faith and worship for them.

In doing so, they were prepared to bear the consequences of the discrimination and exclusion of the Lutheran confession—and not just financial consequences. Thus, the mothers and fathers of independent Lutheran churches claimed “modern” civil rights—freedom of conscience, freedom of expression, freedom of assembly, freedom of organization, because they wanted to secure Lutheran faith, Lutheran confession, and Lutheran worship in independence for themselves and their descendants. However, this religious nonconformism was regularly accompanied by extensive



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political conformism,² recognizing that the state is also one of the tools God uses to do His work in the world.

How did the Lutheran Churches and particularly the Independent Evangelical Lutheran Church (SELK) carry out their work in the context of state control during the pandemic?

This article can only touch on some of the important interactions between church and state during the pandemic. I hope that these examples will illustrate the thinking and acting of the early period of the pandemic.

Now the second Easter under the conditions of the pandemic (2021) is behind us. A year ago, Easter services were prohibited in the Federal Republic of Germany, and most churches and congregations complied with the policy. This is also true for the Independent Evangelical Lutheran Church (SELK). In March and April 2020, knowledge about the impact of the Sars-COVID-19 infection was still patchy on all sides, and uncertainty among the population and social institutions, including churches, was correspondingly high. The measures taken by political leaders were—and still are—highly diverse.

In contrast to the church bodies that are still largely organized according to the regional principle³ such as the territorial churches in the Protestant Church in Germany, and also, although differently structured, the dioceses of the Roman Catholic Church in Germany, the SELK, which is organized nationwide according to the confessional principle, had to respond in its congregations, church districts, and church regions to highly diverse requirements of the respective state authorities. Uniform guidelines for the entire area of the SELK were thus ruled out from the outset. In addition, almost all ecclesiastical regulations, including those in other churches, were mostly reactions to the dynamic events of the pandemic itself, developments which could not be foreseen or predicted.

This can be clearly seen in the recommendations of the SELK church administration in the circular letters of Bishop Hans-Jörg Voigt D.D., the letters of the central church administration and the College of Superintendents to the congregations, written by a special working group.

At the end of February 2020, there was still talk of “a possible coronavirus epidemic.”⁴ The measures recommended at that time look modest compared to the experience of the following year: thematization of *prevention*, getting along without the handshake at the church door, additional hand washing after the absolution with the laying on of hands and before the distribution of Holy Communion, use of “sugar tongs” and thorough cleaning of the chalice after each communicant, if necessary also getting along without the chalice for communion for particularly sensitive people. In any case, such measures were to be explained to the congregations. It should be noted that in this early phase, when the extent of the pandemic was not yet foreseeable, the

circular letters were directed to the office holders in SELK, not to the congregations. Here, the bishop initially performed his task as *pastor pastorum*, pastor of pastors.

There were reactions to this letter, which “surprisingly” showed a “high level of concern among individual members of the congregations.”⁵ For example, a cautious setting aside of the communion using the chalice was accompanied by a reference to the practice of the “intinction of the host by the pastor himself,” the possibility of the “*communio sub una*” [communion under one kind] was also mentioned. It was also recommended that the measures to be taken should be limited in time. The acquisition of individual chalices was expressly discouraged “for various theological reasons,” which were admittedly not explained in more detail.

Two weeks later, four weeks before Easter 2020, church administration and the College of Superintendents addressed the congregations noting the “present distress” of the parishioners affected by illness and death.⁶ On the one hand, the question of theodicy was touched upon and answered with reference to the hiddenness of God. On the other hand, God’s commitment to giving comfort was strongly emphasized, as manifested in the suffering, death, and resurrection of Christ.

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Now the dimensions of the pandemic became perceptible, which for the ecclesiastical sphere coalesced especially around an “extensive ban on church services.”

Obviously, at that time there were different attitudes in the SELK on the question of worship services; there were also voices that advocated “following the Third Commandment on hallowing the holy day/day of rest and holding worship services in spite of all prohibitions.” “We answer here very clearly that this is not possible,” the church administration and the College of Superintendents explained. They pleaded unequivocally “to abide by the orders of the federal government, the states, and the governmental authorities.” This instruction was within the framework of what the Protestant regional churches and the German [Roman Catholic] Bishops’ Conference also largely recommended.⁷ The reason given was “the commandment of love of one’s neighbor . . . in order to protect people at increased personal risk.”

The creativity breaking out in the congregations to ensure worship services reached beyond the church walls was welcomed: “Our worship services are not cancelled. Instead, they are just held in different places, namely, in our homes.” The superintendents pledged to “conscientiously” fulfill their responsibilities in their respective areas of responsibility. Clarification of policies regarding “visits to the sick and divine services in the homes” was given to the individual pastors with the congregations.

For Holy Week 2020, the topic of “fasting from the Lord’s Supper” along with the idea of a virtual divine service with Holy Communion “with electronic transmission of the service at various locations” was clearly rejected. For the imposed “fasting from the Sacrament” the “cruciform shape of the existence of church and Christians” was invoked, especially since the Eucharist belongs “in the midst of the congregation gathered for worship.” For funeral services and burials, the pastors were referred to the “local very diverse and changing regulations,” which should be observed and followed. Reference was also made to the practical aids provided electronically by Prof. Dr. Christoph Barnbrock.⁸

At the end of April 2020, a handout on the organization of worship services under the restrictions of the Corona pandemic followed.⁹ Above all, it was emphasized that “for any public worship service, the regulations of the states and municipalities in terms of possibilities to gather and for minimum social distancing” were to be in force. The organization and conduct of religious services were recommended strictly on the basis of official guidelines; a main reference for guidelines were the “Definitions and Recommendations” of the Robert Koch Institute [the equivalent of the National Institutes of Health]. These included specifying the “maximum number[s] of worshippers” depending on the size of the church building, a sign-in system and marking of seating, and documentation of worship attendance. Further, it contained a recommendation for “condensed forms of worship,” refraining from congregational singing and brass music, refraining from absolution with the laying on of hands, and more specific suggestions for the celebration of Holy Communion, such as distribution of the elements at two stations to a continuously flowing line of communicants, *intinctio*, and, if appropriate, communion under one kind.

In the summer of 2020, misgivings about the “emergency solutions” adopted could be discerned. Some things might not be quite correct “spiritually, theologically, or from the point of view of ecclesiastical practice.”¹⁰ Thus, in a phase of declining incidence, “modifications in church life” were considered. In this process, regional differences were expressly taken into account in a hoped-for “path to normality.” The “recommendation to completely dispense with congregational singing and brass music” was rescinded. However, it was put back into force after the resolutions of the Conference of the Prime Ministers [Governors] of the German states together with Chancellor Merkel of December 13, 2020, which prohibited congregational singing.¹¹ How markedly conflicted were the reactions from the congregations and the pastorate of the SELK can be read between the lines. There was talk of a “surge of tension in congregational boards, in congregations and also between congregations of our church.” Accordingly, thanks were expressed to those in positions of responsibility, not least for having “also fought out or endured painful conflicts.”

As a part of a pastoral letter for the First Sunday in Advent 2020, the SELK bishop observed a far-reaching loss of trust in science, media, and politics. His diagnosis was that German society as a whole was suffering from a loss of trust in institutions and internal cohesion; he identified “the decline of faith in the country” as a “contributory cause” to this phenomenon. He was not unaware of the fact that, for all the gratitude

for the “forms of community [*Gemeinschaft*]” made possible by “modern communication technology,” a fundamental deficit of human need could be noted: “Corporeality shapes our being.” The incarnation of God in Jesus Christ and the gift of the true body and blood of Christ in the sacrament of the altar touched precisely this corporeality of human existence in a salutary way, he said.

However, it should also be noted that the measures taken by most churches and congregations, which were largely in line with state requirements, were in part met with scathing criticism. As recently as October 2020, for example, the former Prime Minister of Saxony-Anhalt, Christine Lieberknecht, repeated her earlier criticism of the churches’ behavior during the pandemic. “The church and also families had their rights curtailed. . . In such a crisis, the church would have special tasks. But it had not acted as a voice for the people in isolation. At the same time, the human being does not live on hygiene measures alone.”¹² Heribert Prantl pointed in the same direction in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* in August 2020. The churches acted out of a “mixture of reason, fear and insecurity,” “sycophancy” was his reproach: “They did not protest when the terminally ill had to die lonely and alone in the clinics. They did not express outrage when the elderly people were isolated in nursing homes.”¹³

Conversely, the churches were met with fierce reproach because, or if, they held to the celebration of Easter services this year (2021). When an appeal was made at this point to the churches and religious communities to refrain from celebrating Easter again in 2021, clear opposition arose on all sides.¹⁴ “We have been surprised. Easter is the most important festival for us; worship services are not an accessory,” said the chairman of the German Catholic Bishops’ Conference, Bishop Bätzing of Limburg, in his reaction to the March 2021 request by the Prime Ministers’ Conference with the German Chancellor for an “Easter pause.” The pause was then overturned after all with a remarkable request from Mrs. Merkel for forgiveness.¹⁵ In addition to the outstanding importance of Easter for the Christian faith, the reference point for the churches was the hygiene concepts that had already been applied at Christmas 2020.

As early as November 2020, the chairman of the Council of the Protestant Church in Germany defended the exemptions for churches: It is important that services may be celebrated in churches, “The soul must be strengthened, especially now!”¹⁶ At Easter 2021 he spoke of an increasing “incidence of psychological problems” and called for “more attention to the social and psychological consequences of the long Corona lockdown.”¹⁷ At the same time, there were pastors who considered the government-imposed measures, such as bans on visits to nursing homes and denial of access to infirmaries, to be wholly

At the same time, there were pastors who considered the government-imposed measures...to be wholly disproportionate to the gravity of the pandemic.

disproportionate to the gravity of the pandemic.¹⁸

In regard to the SELK itself, it was observed “that tensions have also increased considerably in our congregations.” This was countered by an exhortation to peace. Finally, the working group encouraged “the divine services be conducted in strict compliance with the hygiene concepts that have been developed,” but also emphasized the “freedom . . . to also stay away from these services if this appears necessary due to danger in an individual’s own situation, one’s own conscience, or also for the preservation of peace in the family.”¹⁹

Attempts at classification

The common good and the love of neighbor

“Seek the welfare of the city” (Jer 29:7). “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Lev 19:18; Mt 22:39).

The recommended far-reaching implementation of state and officially prescribed measures in the statements from the SELK church administration obviously followed the prophetic instruction “Seek the welfare of the city” (Jer. 29:7). It is connected with Jesus’ commandment to love one’s neighbor: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Lev 19:18; Mt 22:39). Thus, it is an application, even if not explicit, of Martin Luther’s interpretation of the Fourth and Fifth Commandments to the conditions of this time and world. This concerns orderly relationships in the coexistence of family, society, state (Fourth Commandment) and respect for the right to life, the physical and mental integrity of the neighbor (Fifth Commandment). These rules, instructions, counsels, and standards are valid everywhere and always, no matter how the social or political conditions may change historically. We human beings are given standards for a life that is pleasing to God and, at the same time, humane.

These rules, instructions, counsels, and standards are valid everywhere and always, no matter how the social or political conditions may change historically. We human beings are given standards for a life that is pleasing to God and, at the same time, humane.

The disregard of the divine instructions for a life in the community of humankind on this earth is a profound indication of a deep-seated illness of our time and world. This is certainly true for the political sphere. This includes attitudes born of conspiracy-theories, denigration of scientific results, also by physicians²⁰, and not least, attacks on officeholders of the Federal Republic of Germany.²¹ Unfortunately, the same symptom of illness can also be found in certain areas of church life.

What is “best for the city”—in terms of the earthly well-being of individuals and the population as a whole—can only be determined according to the rules of scientific investigation, consensus-oriented discussion, and reasonable understanding. This requires sufficient expertise, careful research, and a collaborative effort to find appropriate solutions that are commensurate with the hazards and circumstances. Medical, economic, social, and psychological aspects, local and regional conditions must all be taken into account. This means that extremely complex contexts must be subjected to thorough analysis.

Churches can contribute to the discourse in society on the basis of information or with the voice of members of the congregation who have such competencies. Admittedly, this requires the most informed judgment possible; for the churches are inevitably composed of a wide range of people, who are, like all others, also capable of error.

That churches in particular should not only have the protection of weak members of society in mind, but also need mediating and energetic commitment to them, should be self-evident on the basis of the commandment of love for the neighbor. The fact that the church has its own contribution to make beyond the living conditions of this earth, a contribution which serves the community and the world best, must not be lost sight of, especially in times of crisis.

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Between the duty of obedience and the autonomy of the church

“Let every person be subject to the governing authorities” (Rm 13:1). “We must obey God rather than men” (Acts 5:29).

For Martin Luther and the Lutheran Church, according to its confessional writings in the 16th century, all Christians are addressed in the same way when it comes to shaping their walks of life.²² Luther rejects a two-level ethic according to which special “evangelical counsels” apply to monks and nuns, which go far beyond what the “simple Christian” must do and refrain from doing.

However, all people belong to the “kingdom of the world,” but only the believers belong to the “kingdom of Christ.” It is true that in the “kingdom of Christ” the individual believer can certainly practice renunciation of rights for himself because he follows the gospel. But for the others, the “neighbors,” it is his responsibility to resist injustice and help to enforce the divine Law and its counsels. This is especially true when Christians hold an office in the state and society, i.e., a mandate that has been bestowed upon them in an orderly way and which they, being Christians, ultimately regard as their vocation—coming from God. The institution of the secular authorities,

precisely as divinely established, serves to ward off, restrict, or sanction evil in the world; consequently, it does not have the task, nor even the right, not even as a “Christian authority,” to command the soul, i.e., faith, personal conviction, and conscience.²³

The SELK also finds itself in an inescapable cultural context; attitudes and mentalities from modernity and postmodernity do not remain external to the church body itself, and they lead to different positions on various questions, even within its own ranks. Major tensions between supporters of the official measures and deniers of the dangers resulting from the pandemic are obviously present. Provost Gert Kelter from Görlitz writes: “In my almost 60-year memory and personal perception, our society, but unfortunately also our church, has never been so strongly divided and polarized, never so separated by walls and fences into irreconcilable parties as just now.”²⁴ This assessment, of course, need not refer only to actions and reactions of congregation members, congregations, and pastors regarding the pandemic, but probably includes observations from this area as well. This may be a phenomenon of inescapable contemporaneity that even a Scripture- and confession-bound Lutheran church committed to the Book of Concord cannot escape. It must ask itself to what extent the homogeneity presupposed by its scriptural and confessional commitment, in the sense of unanimity in “believing, teaching and confessing,” corresponds to its own ecclesial reality.

Thus, there are congregations in SELK that maintained worship services with congregants being present by applying sophisticated hygiene concepts.²⁵ There are other congregations that have abstained from such services²⁶ or continue to abstain²⁷ from holding such services for a longer period of time, not least from Sunday school,²⁸ but also the celebration of Holy Communion.²⁹ Church groups either do not hold customary meetings at all,³⁰ or these meetings are held via internet or telephone conference.³¹ In addition to or in place of the worship services, video transmissions are made available on the Internet,³² for example for services listened to at home.³³ Various kinds of pastoral care, especially for at-risk groups, are maintained as much as possible; this includes offering communion services in a family home.³⁴

In view of the tension between the duty of obedience and love of neighbor, the church must first be self-critical of its own embeddedness in its contemporary situation, and only then critical over against societal developments, so that it becomes aware of its own interwovenness in the course of time. Thus, what it must say critically to the world outside of itself must first of all be addressed to itself if its pronouncements and proposals wish to be credible.

The church will be asked to what extent it and its members conform to the divine standards which it intends to proclaim to the world. And it will have to admit and confess, both for its individual members and for itself as a whole, the failure to meet the divine standards and some offenses against them. This, however, will not impair its credibility, but rather strengthen it, if it does not speak out of an attitude of self-

conceit, but rather in an appropriate kind of humility, which is characterized by the awareness of its own failure to meet the divine standards.

Order in the state is always bound to “the law and the institution of the constitutional state”³⁵ to which, for this reason alone, its monopoly on the use of force is to be attributed. Its ultimate justification, of course, cannot consist in the—legitimate—threat of counterviolence against violations of the law, but must be understood “as an order desired and affirmed from within,” and it must be borne by such insight.³⁶ The hallmark of the secular state—which is no longer based on religion—is always the freedom of religion that it grants, although this does not apply without restriction. On the part of the state, the “neutrality of the state in religious matters” is decisive.³⁷ “At the same time, however, the recognition of religious freedom as a fundamental human right . . . must also be guaranteed by the state” since it is “about a free space for the development of the person and the search for truth.”³⁸

Within this framework, ecclesiastical statements can be expressed in the sense that they are “the highest obligations, no longer debatable demarcations or critical disapprovals and the setting of boundaries” in ethical questions.³⁹ Such statements then have the character of a confession, but they cannot be used as sanctions. In a kind of hierarchy of values, “[t]he advocacy of the unrestricted protection of life and human dignity” is to be weighted as the “center of current church confession in moral questions.”⁴⁰

Nevertheless, human dignity and freedom exist only within a given created “context of power and responsibility,” and not in a “space free of the exercise of domination.”⁴¹ For we always must take a community as a given, a presupposition for one’s own life, will, and design for life. Accordingly, the state or other authoritative institutions must “create the external conditions for the members of society to be themselves as far as possible, to be there for others, and to care for the world.” Admittedly, these are demands that cannot be made only by Christians. Christians, however, interpret them as the standards of the Creator’s purpose for human existence.⁴²

A “neutral attitude” toward the state and social developments is in any case not a possible attitude for Christians. As much as church and state are to be distinguished from each other and both “kingdoms, or realms” are not to interfere with each other’s spheres, it is, however, the task of the church to highlight God’s will to the state and to remind it with its admonitions of the divine order. Thus, it is also the task of the church to openly emphasize God’s Law to the state in the case of human rights violations and to announce His judgment.⁴³ For even the state, from a Christian point of view, must respect God’s will in its sphere. If it disregards the will of God, it attacks the kingship of Christ. With this proclamation, the Church exercises a guardianship over the state, reminds it of God’s Law and commandment and, if necessary, proclaims God’s judgment against it, without itself becoming the executor of this judgment.⁴⁴ Admittedly, the church as church has no genuine political mandate whatsoever.

Under these conditions, it cannot be ruled out that the churches, their representatives, or their ministers will object to governmental decrees and official measures that are manifestly inconsistent with the protection of life and human dignity, or even act contrary to such decrees. For the pastoral care of the elderly, the seriously ill, and even more so of the dying, such cases of conflict have existed and would continue to exist if pastors were denied access to the members of the congregation under their care. In such cases, there is, in principle, also the possibility of invoking existing legal regulations.⁴⁵ If such an appeal were not granted, the autonomy of the church would have to express itself in formal resistance. This would be, especially with regard to the program of the “Independent Evangelical Lutheran Church” signaled in its name, the actualization of its independence.⁴⁶

Preliminary concluding remarks

On Sunday (*Misericordias Domini*), April 18, 2021, a long-announced⁴⁷ nationwide commemoration for the nearly 80,000 people who had died in the Federal Republic of Germany to that date from or with the Corona virus was held by both governmental⁴⁸ and religious⁴⁹ leaders. Politically, the concern for social cohesion in Germany was obviously the guiding principle: “Let us not allow the pandemic, which is already forcing us as people to keep our distance, to also drive us apart as a society,” said President Steinmeier at the central memorial service. His urgent appeal was for a united, forward-looking effort: “My request today is: Let us talk about pain and suffering and anger. But let’s not get lost in recriminations, in looking back, but let’s gather strength once again for the way forward, the way out of the pandemic, which we want to go and will go if we go this path together.”⁵⁰ The plea for sympathy for the suffering of those affected in a societally situated commemoration, with the leaders of our country’s five constitutional bodies in attendance, is absolutely welcome.

“My request today is: Let us talk about pain and suffering and anger. But let’s not get lost in recriminations, in looking back, but let’s gather strength once again for the way forward, the way out of the pandemic, which we want to go and will go if we go this path together.”

With the participation of Jewish and Muslim representatives, there had previously been a religious memorial service in the Kaiser Wilhelm Memorial Church in Berlin.⁵¹ The chairman of the (Roman Catholic) German Bishops’ Conference, Bishop Bätzing, admonished, “All that is missing here, all that is robbed of closeness and affection by the pandemic, that is what wounds the soul.”⁵² The chairman of the Council of the Evangelical [Protestant] Church in Germany, Bishop Bedford-Strohm, interpreted both of these commemorations as “something like public pastoral care.”⁵³ The chairman of the Association of Christian Churches in Germany, Archpriest Radu Constantin Miron, said that it was “all the more important that we mourn together today with this service, but also set a sign of comfort—across borders that even the

virus does not know,” because the virus knows no frontiers, not even those of denominations and religions.⁵⁴

Martin Luther had already spoken with great passion in 1520 “On the Freedom of a Christian” and thus placed anew the topic of freedom in Christianity and thus also in Western intellectual history in the center of discussion.⁵⁵ For Luther, the question of freedom was first and foremost one of the human relationships with God. In contrast, once “freedom” is defined in essence as “freedom of conscience,” it is true that it concerns “primarily the inner being.”⁵⁶ As such, however, this view of freedom necessarily has “consequences for life and for the spaces of relationship and communication in which human beings exist.”⁵⁷ And that is where the church must speak.

But it should speak as the church, that is, as the Church of Jesus Christ. From the core of its message, it must proclaim more clearly than what it can express together with the two other “monotheistic religions,” even though a message of “intimacy, consolation and hope” has its significance.⁵⁸ The assumption of such a social task involving both Christians and other religions is therefore problematic because “with this action, an identity of citizen and Christian community is presupposed, which at least today in Germany no longer exists in this way.”⁵⁹

Thus, in contrast to the “civil-religious service” on the occasion of the terrorist attack on the Christmas market at Breitscheidplatz, Berlin, in December 2016, the separation of the religious celebration from the social commemoration on April 18 is to be welcomed. For the church, for the sake of its actual mission, must not merely satisfy the needs of a civil religion. Instead, as Christoph Barnbrock has rightly formulated, an “answer” is called for to the question of “what God Himself has to do (or does not have to do) with this event and what people in this situation may concretely hope for and expect from God and what, if necessary, a new orientation of their relationship with God might look like.”⁶⁰

It is not a matter of the church asserting itself, forcing its message on others even alleging that it is legitimized by God to speak no matter the feelings of others, but of soberly declaring to itself and to the world to which it is directed what is the heart of the matter: As human beings, we stand before God and can neither void his determination of our place nor place it afresh outside of the world. We are responsible.

For Christianity, therefore, the principle established by the apostle Peter is valid: “We must obey God rather than men” (Acts 5:29). This is a critical reservation against all societal or political striving for omnipotence. Moreover, it is a fundamental insight of Lutheran theology that I know myself as sinner and saint at the same time (*simul iustus ac peccator*). In this sense, Luther speaks of the church as the “*maxima peccatrix*,” the “very greatest sinner,” but in the perspective of forgiveness and reconciliation.

By distinguishing the two kingdoms, or realms, i.e., the different ways in which God (NB!) controls the course of the world and the church, Martin Luther theologically released the secular realm from clerical paternalism and allowed for the differentiation between the “penultimate” and the “ultimate.”⁶¹ Thus the Wittenberg reformer and the Lutheran Reformation prepared the way for the separation of church and state. And yet Christian theology, or the Lutheran church, can never abandon God’s claim to rule over all times, peoples, individuals, spheres of life and living conditions.

Endnotes

¹ Cf. Werner Klän, “Altlutherische Kirchen” in *Konfessionskunde*, Johannes Oeldemann, ed., *Handbuch der Ökumene und Konfessionskunde*, vol. 1 (Leipzig and Paderborn: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2015), 274–285.

² Cf. Werner Klän, “Um Kirche und Bekenntnis. Die preußischen Altlutheraner zwischen Selbstbehauptung und Staatstreue,” in *Kirchen und Bekenntnisgruppen im Osten des Deutschen Reiches. Ihre Beziehungen zu Staat und Gesellschaft*, Bernhart Jähniß and Silke Spieler, eds. (Bonn: Bonn, Kulturstiftung d. dt. Vertriebenen, 1991).

³ Cf. Heinrich August Winkler, *Werte und Mächte. Eine Geschichte der westlichen Welt* (München: C. H. Beck, 2019), 398–409.

⁴ Bischof Hans-Jörg Voigt D.D., [Circular Letter on Dealing with a Possible Coronavirus Epidemic, Sign 15/00-1, To the pastors, pastoral assistants, parish deacons, parish vicars and vicars, and retired pastors of the Independent Evangelical Lutheran Church].

⁵ Bischof Hans-Jörg Voigt D.D., 2. Rundschreiben zum Umgang mit einer möglichen Coronavirus-Epidemie, Zeichen 15/00-1, An die Pfarrer, Pastoralreferentinnen, Pfarrdiakonen, Pfarrvikare und Vikare sowie an die Pfarrer im Ruhestand der Selbständigen Evangelisch-Lutherischen Kirche, Hannover, 07. 03. 2020.

⁶ Kirchenleitung und Kollegium der Superintendenten: Ich will euch trösten – Brief an die Gemeinden [I will comfort you - Letter to the congregations], Hannover, 21. 03. 2020.

⁷ Cf. https://www.zeit.de/2020/13/gottesdienst-verbot-coronavirus-quarantaene-naechstenliebe?utm_referrer=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.startpage.com%2F, retrieved 09.04.2021 [“dem dritten Gebot zur Feiertagsheiligung zu folgen und trotz aller Verbote Gottesdienst zu halten.” “Wir antworten hier sehr klar, dass dies nicht möglich ist,” “das Gebot der Nächstenliebe,” “um Menschen mit erhöhtem persönlichem Risiko zu schützen.”]

⁸ www.selk.de [Aids and Recommendations/Offerings in the Corona Crisis at praxishilfen.selk.de]. Kirchenleitung und Kollegium der Superintendenten: [My heart exults in the LORD ... He raises up the poor from the dust (1 Sam 2:1,8)], Hannover, 18.04.2020.

⁹ Handreichung für Gemeinden der Selbständigen Evangelisch-Lutherischen Kirche (SELK) zur Organisation von Gottesdiensten unter den Einschränkungen der Corona-Pandemie (Stand 25.04.2020). [Handout for congregations of the Independent Evangelical Lutheran Church (SELK) on organizing worship services under the constraints of the Corona pandemic.]

¹⁰ Arbeitsgruppe Corona-Krise von Kirchenleitung und Kollegium der Superintendenten: [My soul longs for your salvation; I hope in your word. My eyes long for your promise; I ask, When will you comfort me . . . I have not forgotten your statutes. How long must your servant endure? (Ps 119:81–84)], Hannover, 12.07.2020.

¹¹ Arbeitsgruppe Corona-Krise von Kirchenleitung und Kollegium der Superintendenten Empfehlung der AG Corona zum Verzicht auf Gemeindegesang, 16.12.2020 [Recommendation of the Corona Working Group to forgo congregational singing].

¹² Cf. <https://www.pro-medienmagazin.de/lieberknecht-erneuert-kritik-an-kirchen-waehrend-corona-krise/>, retrieved 2021-04-12.

¹³ Heribert Prantl: Kirchenleere, cf. <https://www.sueddeutsche.de/politik/kirche-corona-kolumne-prantl-1.4992658?reduced=true>, retrieved 2021-04-12.

¹⁴ Kirchen pochen auf Präsenzgottesdienste an Ostern, cf. <https://www.wz.de/politik/inland/kirchen-pochen-auf-praesenzgottesdienste-an-ostern-aid-56957037>, retrieved 2021-04-12 [Churches insist on presence services at Easter].

¹⁵ <https://www.zdf.de/nachrichten/politik/corona-reaktionen-gipfel-handel-kirche-100.html>, retrieved 2021-04-12 [Massive Criticism of Resolutions - Churches "Surprised," Trades Shocked]; in addition: <https://www.bundeskanzlerin.de/bkin-de/aktuelles/pressestatement-von-bundeskanzlerin-merkel-nach-der-videokonferenz-mit-den-regierungschefinnen-und-regierungschefs-der-laender-1881130> [press statement by Chancellor Merkel after video conference with heads of state governments].

¹⁶ <https://www.ekd.de/corona-massnahmen-bedford-strohm-verteidigt-ausnahme-fuer.htm>, retrieved 2021-04-12.

¹⁷ Bedford-Strohm: "Die seelische Inzidenz steigt", <https://www.evangelisch.de/inhalte/184323/29-03-2021/bedford-strohm-die-seelische-inzidenz-steigt>, retrieved 2021-04-12 [The mental incidence is rising].

¹⁸ Interview: Warum ein Pfarrer die Corona-Maßnahmen kritisiert <https://chrismon.evangelisch.de/artikel/2020/50952/interview-warum-ein-pfarrer-die-corona-massnahmen-kritisiert>, retrieved 2021-04-12 [Why a pastor criticizes the Corona measures].

¹⁹ Arbeitsgruppe Corona aktuell von Kirchenleitung und Kollegium der Superintendenten: 26. 03. 2021 [Corona pandemic: worship services at this time].

²⁰ Cf., e.g., <https://www.spiegel.de/consent-a-?targetUrl=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.spiegel.de%2Fpanorama%2Fjustiz%2Fcorona-leugner-unter-medizinern-aerzte-auf-abwegen-a-cd3e2abb-cce0-469d-a8ad-24a817fb3369&ref=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.startpage.com%2F>;
<https://deutsch.medscape.com/artikelansicht/4909471>;

<https://www.aekno.de/aerzte/rheinisches-aerzteblatt/ausgabe/artikel/2021/april-2021/corona-leugner-berufsrechtliche-folgen-fuer-aerztinnen-und-aerzte>.

²¹ Cf., e.g., <https://www.faz.net/aktuell/stil/leib-seele/fuenf-dinge/verschwoerungstheorien-diese-fuenf-dinge-nerven-an-corona-leugnern-16918502.html>;
<https://www.welt.de/debatte/kommentare/article224275822/Corona-Leugner-Die-Verschwoerungs-Extremisten-sind-unter-uns.html>; <https://www.br.de/kultur/gesellschaft/was-gegen-verschwoerungserzaehlungen-hilft-100.html>, retrieved 2021-04-12.

²² Cf. Martin Honecker, "Interpretation of Luther's treatise on secular Authority of 1523," in Honecker, *Grundriß der Sozialethik* (Berlin/New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1995), 17–20.

²³ Honecker, *Grundriß der Sozialethik* (as FN 52), 19.

²⁴ Gert Kelter, "Gemeindejubiläum," [Word of greeting by our Provost Gert Kelter (Görlitz)], Pfarrbrief der Evangelisch-Lutherischen St. Mariengemeinde Berlin-Zehlendorf, April/May 2021, 13.

²⁵ E.g., St. Petri-Gemeinde Hannover: <http://www.selk-st-petri-gemeinde-hannover.de/index.php/gottesdienste>, retrieved 2021-04-16; das geltende Schutzkonzept ist im Internet abrufbar: [http://www.selk-st-petri-gemeinde-hannover.de/images/Schutzkonzept Corona der St. Petri-Gemeinde Hannover - %C3%9Cberarbeitung Januar 2021 II mit Unterschrift.pdf](http://www.selk-st-petri-gemeinde-hannover.de/images/Schutzkonzept_Corona_der_St._Petri-Gemeinde_Hannover_-_%C3%9Cberarbeitung_Januar_2021_II_mit_Unterschrift.pdf), retrieved 2021-04-16 [“Worship services are the heart of our parish life. We usually celebrate them at 10:00 a.m.as services with and without communion. Once a month we usually invite people to confession before or during the service. Faith talks in the form of Christian teaching are offered at irregular intervals. Due to the viral pandemic, two services are usually offered at this time in order to maintain the necessary spacing.”].

²⁶ E.g., Kreuzgemeinde Witten: <https://www.kreuzgemeinde-witten.de/news/?highlight=2454>, retrieved 2021-04-16 [“On Monday evening the church council decided that from Sunday 7 March 2021 services will again be celebrated in our Kreuzkirche. Guiding this decision were the good experiences with the devotions in recent weeks and our good hygiene and safety concept, which of course continues to apply. Until further notice, we will celebrate services of the word without communion. Those who cannot or do not want to do without the Lord’s Supper, please contact the pastors, who will be happy to serve the Lord’s Supper at home.”].

²⁷ E.g., St.-Thomas-Gemeinde Münster: <http://www.st-thomas-gemeinde.de/index2.htm> [Note on services in Osnabrück: “all services are under reservation. Currently Osnabrück is experiencing high incidence numbers. There are also no services in St. Peter’s Church.”]

²⁸ Trinitatisgemeinde München: <https://www.selk-muenchen.de/>, retrieved 2021-04-16 [“Unfortunately, for security reasons, no separate children’s service can currently be offered, but there will be something for the children in the family services!”].

²⁹ E.g., <https://www.kreuzgemeinde-witten.de/news/?highlight=2454>, retrieved 2021-04-16.

³⁰ E.g., St. Michaelsgemeinde Wolfsburg: [“Due to current Corona numbers, no parish circles are meeting at this time.”]. <https://selk-wolfsburg.de/>; Martin-Luther- Gemeinde Bad Schwartau: [“Until further notice, however, there will still be no children’s, youth or senior events on our premises. Our pastoral services will remain in place.”].

³¹ <http://www.selk-schwartau.de/>, retrieved 2021-04-16.

³² E.g., Martin-Luther-Gemeinde Bad Schwartau: www.selk-schwartau.de, retrieved 2021-04-16 [“Our Sunday and holiday services can be celebrated live or time-delayed via the Martin Luther Parish's new You Tube channel. The broadcast begins approximately 15 minutes before the service starts.”].

³³ E.g., Kreuzgemeinde Neumünster: <https://www.selk-neumuenster.de/5/hausgottesdienste>, retrieved 2021-04-16.

³⁴ E.g., Martin-Luther-Gemeinde Bad Schwartau: <http://www.selk-schwartau.de/>, retrieved 2021-04-16 [“For members of at-risk groups (elderly and persons with pre-existing conditions) who do not wish to attend our corporate worship services, Pastor Klaus Bergmann offers individual communion services during the week (either at the church or at home). Please contact him directly.”].

- ³⁵ Wolfgang Lienemann, *Grundinformation Theologische Ethik*, UTB3138, (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2008), 212.
- ³⁶ Oswald Bayer, “*Gesetz und Moral. Zur ethischen Bedeutung des Rechts*,” in ders. *Freiheit als Antwort* (Tubingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1995), (as FN 17), 272–282, 276.
- ³⁷ Lienemann, *Grundinformation Theologische Ethik* (as FN 65), 214.
- ³⁸ Honecker, *Grundriß der Sozialethik* (as FN 52), 706.
- ³⁹ Lienemann, *Grundinformation Theologische Ethik* (as FN 65), 267.
- ⁴⁰ Lienemann, *Grundinformation Theologische Ethik* (as FN 65), 269.
- ⁴¹ Oswald Bayer, *Gesetz und Moral* (as FN 66), 275.
- ⁴² Dietz Lange, *Ethik in evangelischer Perspektive. Grundfragen christlicher Lebenspraxis* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1992), 464–475.
- ⁴³ Friedrich Wilhelm Hopf, “*Zum Thema Menschenrechte*,” in *Kritische Standpunkte für die Gegenwart. Ein lutherischer Theologe im Kirchenkampf des Dritten Reichs, über seinen Bekenntniskampf nach 1945 und zum Streit um seine Haltung zur Apartheid* (OUH E 11), Markus Büttner and Werner Klän, eds. (Göttingen: Edition Ruprecht, 2012), 366–379.
- ⁴⁴ Dominik Bohne, *Friedrich Wilhelm Hopf 1910–1982. Pfarrer, Kirchenpolitiker, theologischer Publizist, Mann der Mission, Materialien Reicher Ebrachgrund 5* (Mühlhausen-Münster-Hamburg-London: LIT Verlag, 2001), 197–199.
- ⁴⁵ E.g., St.-Mariengemeinde Berlin-Zehlendorf: <https://www.lutherisch.de/index.php/latest-news>, retrieved 2021-04-16 [“You are in hospital or in a nursing home or need a pastoral conversation for yourself in a crisis situation or wish to be accompanied at a baptism, wedding, funeral or other challenging life situations or wish to have Holy Communion at home because you cannot come to church services (anymore)? Please feel free to contact me! My contact information is on the second to last page of the parish newsletter. This offer is also valid in Corona times. It should be noted that the Prevention and Control of Infectious Diseases in Humans Act of 2000 regulates chaplains’ access to ‘segregated persons’ nationwide. It states: ‘The attending physician and persons designated to provide care have free access to secluded persons. The attending physician must allow the pastor or certifying persons—other persons may—access, imposing the necessary rules of conduct.’ (§ 30, para. 4). With all understanding for the difficulty of implementing comprehensive hygiene measures and the concern especially with regard to high-riskgroups, it is to be hoped that this information will also open the door to those affected in individual cases, where necessary, for me as a pastor. Because that has also become clear in the past few weeks. Especially in this group, many people suffer from the psychosomatic consequences of the corona measures over the long term”].
- ⁴⁶ Cf., e.g., the self-presentation of Evangelisch-Lutherischen Dreieinigkeitsgemeinde Hohenwestedt: <https://www.selk-hohenwestedt.de/index.php> [Dreieinigkeitsgemeinde Hohenwestedt belongs to the Independent Evangelical Lutheran Church (SELK) and is what the name says: Independent church, independent of the state and large churches; Ev. Lutheran Church, committed to the Word of God alone, following the Reformation of Martin Luther, financed by voluntary donations instead of church taxes].

⁴⁷ Kirche und Staat gedenken der Corona-Opfer Sind im Tod nicht alle Menschen gleich? <https://www.tagesspiegel.de/politik/kirche-und-staat-gedenken-der-corona-opfer-sind-im-tod-nicht-alle-menschen-gleich/26952916.html> [Church and State Commemorate Corona Victims. Aren't All Men Equal in Death?].

⁴⁸ Tagesschau: Gedenkfeier für Corona-Tote: *"Ihr seid nicht allein in Eurem Leid"*, <https://www.tagesschau.de/inland/steinmeier-997.html> [Memorial Service for Corona Dead: "You Are Not Alone in Your Sorrow"].

⁴⁹ Kirchen und Sozialverbände gedenken Pandemie-Betroffenen In Erinnerung an Corona-Opfer und Helfer, <https://www.domradio.de/themen/corona/2021-04-18/erinnerung-corona-opfer-und-helfer-kirchen-und-sozialverbaende-gedenken-pandemie-betroffenen>, retrieved 2021-04-19 [Churches and social associations commemorate pandemic victims. In memory of Corona victims and helpers]; Bedford-Strohm: Corona-Gedenken ist "öffentliche Seelsorge", <https://www.sonntagsblatt.de/artikel/kirche/coronavirus-krise-alle-aktuellen-meldungen-zu-kirchlichen-veranstaltungen-...>, retrieved 2021-04-19 [Corona commemoration is "public pastoral care"].

⁵⁰ Steinmeier, Gedenken an Corona-Opfer *"Die Trauer verbindet uns"*, <https://www.zdf.de/nachrichten/panorama/corona-steinmeier-gedenkfeier-100.html>, retrieved 2021-04-19. [Commemoration of Corona Victims - Steinmeier: "Grief Unites Us"].

⁵¹ <https://www.tagesschau.de/inland/steinmeier-997.html>, retrieved 2021-04-19.

⁵² <https://www.domradio.de/themen/corona/2021-04-18/erinnerung-corona-opfer-und-helfer-kirchen-und-sozialverbaende-gedenken-pandemie-betroffenen>, retrieved 2021-04-19.

⁵³ <https://www.sonntagsblatt.de/artikel/kirche/coronavirus-krise-alle-aktuellen-meldungen-zu-kirchlichen-veranstaltungen-...>, retrieved 2021-04-19.

⁵⁴ <https://www.domradio.de/themen/corona/2021-04-18/erinnerung-corona-opfer-und-helfer-kirchen-und-sozialverbaende-gedenken-pandemie-betroffenen>, retrieved 2021-04-19.

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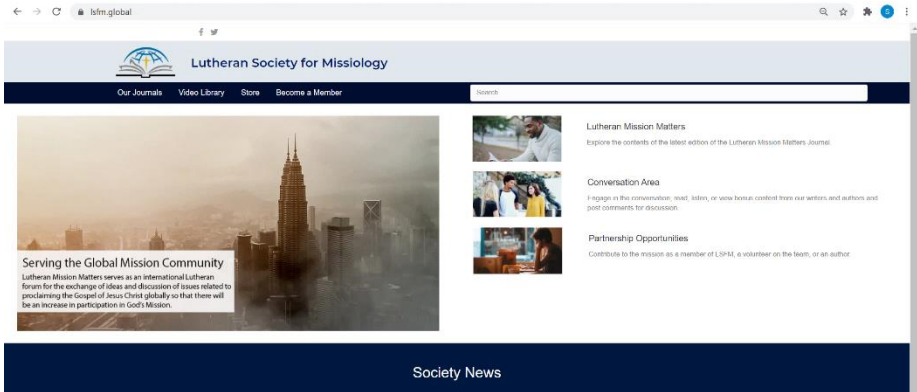
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Enter the conversation: “Why Lutheran Mission Matters.”



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The Missionary God in the Apostles' Creed: How Did the Apostles' Creed Portray a Missionary God?

By Wondimu M. Game

Introduction

The Word of God, the Bible from the beginning to the end, describes God as the Creator of the World, who created everything out of nothing “*ex nihilo*.” “. . . God is the primary and fundamental reality with reference to which all of creation is oriented and understood.”¹ Likewise, the heaven and earth, and all creations in heaven and earth, silently and “eco-vocally” declare God the Creator, God Almighty, God the Father of all, and Redeemer of all, good and just. Creation echoes God’s indescribable attributes, showing how His implicit and explicit fingerprints are over everything and declaring God’s presence and His might. Thus, creation and its multifaceted ecosystem undeniably pronounces God’s presence, beauty, and His love for His creation.

Moreover, God’s particular description of the creation of humankind – making man with His hands from the dust, breathing His own breath into humankind, sharing with them His own image (the image of God), and making them after His likeness (Gen 1:26-31) – declares God’s unconditional love and honor to humankind. Similarly, God’s fellowship and conversing with humankind, and their delegation to vice regency depicts God’s intimacy and purpose with humankind and His loving nature. God loved and honored humankind, imprinting His own image on them so that they could reflect upon His image and likeness. Also, God crowned man as co-



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governor and steward of His creation. Man, however, came to doubt God's word and defy His Lordship. Man disobeyed, broke God's covenant, fell in transgression and lost his covenant communion with God. The fall marred the image of God, subjected man to death and began a rebellion against God, enmity with each other, and with creation. But a missionary God, who created man with His own image and likeness did not abandon the man but continued His mission to rescue the man. God followed after man and said to him, "Where are you?" (Gen 3:9). This indicates God's loving and caring nature. Additionally, God promised to redeem humankind and to crush the head of the serpent through the offspring of Eve, restoring the original fellowship through the atoning death of His Son (Gen 3:15). God sharing His image, following the man after the fall, and promising redemption reveals God's missionary nature and His mission actions to restore the broken fellowship with His creation, humankind.

Moreover, the Word of God, which described God as the creator, similarly described God as the redeemer and described His missionary intent and actions since the fall of Adam. As Wright affirmed: "Mission is what the Bible is all about."² In the Old Testament, God's missionary nature is clearly revealed by His promise to Adam, by His calling, covenantal promise to Abraham, and by sending Abraham as the source of blessings to the all nations of the earth, (Gen 12:1-3). Also, God continued His promise to Abraham's descendants and chose Abraham's children, the children of Israel, to be a priestly kingdom, (Ex 19:6). This means that those given dominion in the earthly realm also have a mediating/priestly role in the vertical relationship. The exodus of Israel from Egypt is a foretaste of the forthcoming redemption through Jesus Christ, and is evidence of God's love and His mighty hand to redeem His people from sin and the hand of Satan. Israel's deliverance from Egyptian slavery and from the grasp of their various enemies by the mighty hand of God was an echo of God's missionary nature and action.

Likewise, the Old Testament prophecy which declared God's master plan of redemption through the Messiah and the coming of His Son, Jesus Christ, also revealed the missionary nature of God.

Jesus' atoning death and resurrection for the transgression of mankind was also the basis for God's missionary task of restoring human righteousness and life. It also vindicated His messiahship, revealing Jesus' missionary nature as the one who was sent and who is the sender. Correspondingly, the Great Commission which Jesus gave to His disciples and to the church declared His missionary objective and its scope to redeem all nations (Mt 28:18-20). Also, the Holy Spirit, who proceeds from God the Father and Son was sent to teach and walk alongside the church, giving her the power for missionary endeavors and once again confirming God's missionary nature. Thus, the Bible obviously describes the Triune God as a missionary God and describes

mission as His mission (*missio-Dei*) to redeem the mankind and to restore the creation to His original intent.

Next to the Bible are the ecumenical creeds which are reflections and summaries of the Bible, and church tradition succinctly summarized as the revelation of Himself given by the Triune God. God's attributes and redemptive work stated in these creeds also echo God's missionary nature and actions. In particular, the Apostles' Creed, which is the foremost ancient and Trinitarian creed and model for all ecumenical creeds, explicitly and implicitly describes the Triune God as creator, redeemer, and re-creator of His creation through His son Jesus Christ's death and resurrection, and the Holy Spirit who was sent to sustain and walk alongside the church. Dorothy Sayers presented the creeds as "the greatest drama ever staged" and described how the plot pivots upon a single character.

The creeds open the drama with God creating the heaven and earth, move to a focus on Christ's surprising and tragic death followed with His unexpected resurrection, and conclude with the Spirit's breathing new life into creation with the resurrection of the body. In this they provide something of an outline of the Scriptures that stretches from creation in Genesis 1, runs through the gospel, and conclude with the new creation of Revelation 21.³

Thus, the creed answers the question who Triune God is and depicts His missionary nature. Similarly, the definitive substance of the creed may be summarized as follows,

The "creed of the Apostles" speaks simply and straightforwardly about the Father, Son and Holy Spirit and focuses on their activity within the world (*opera ad extra*). So, the Father is identified by His work of creation; the Son is identified by His incarnation, death and resurrection; and the Spirit is confessed alongside the church, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the flesh, and life everlasting. Within the Creed's framework there is a movement from creation through redemption to the consummation of all things.⁴

The framework of the creeds shows us that God is a missionary from the very beginning and the creator of missionary actions is revealed in the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Thus, this article will attempt to understand more fully God's missionary nature and actions in the creed, and how the Apostles' Creed depicts the missionary God. It will examine the Apostles' Creed in general, its historical background and usage in the Christian history, and how it has portrayed the missionary God in general. Second, it

will try to briefly introduce the nature of the missionary God as it is found in each article of the Creed, as well as the church's missionary role throughout the world.

The Missionary God in the Apostles' Creed

The Apostles' Creed is the most ancient creed of the three ecumenical creeds, which "was formulated over a period of five centuries (between the third and eighth centuries)."⁵ It is the oldest creed, but always fresh and relevant for each age. Arand affirms, it is "at the same time the church's oldest creed and newest creed."⁶ It defines what Christianity is and answers in whom and in what Christians are believing, defining the boundaries of Christianity and describing what early Christians confessed.⁷ It is ecumenical; it serves the body of Christ across denominational and geographic boundaries as a yardstick for true Christianity and as a mouthpiece for true Christians. It succinctly articulates the Triune God, and God's attributes and actions: As the Father almighty, and the creator, "its opening declaration posits the equation, 'God' = 'the Father' = 'the Almighty' = 'the Creator of heaven and earth.'"⁸ This familiar term portrays God as the Father of His Son Jesus Christ from eternity, and the Father of all creation in heaven and on earth. Thus, the word 'God' does not refer to an abstract divine being, but to a concrete person within the narrative. 'God' is simply identified with the Father and confessed, "I believe in God, the Father Almighty".⁹

Equally, this Father God is depicted as a conversant God – communicating with His creatures and His image-bearer, man – and as the loving father, the redeemer of mankind and His creation. He is presented as the sender of His only Son, who was made incarnate and sent to accomplish His divine agenda. Further, the Father and the Son sent the Holy Spirit helper and sustainer of His church in order to fulfill the Great Commission and prepare the church as a bride for her bridegroom Jesus Christ. Also, the clear purpose of the creation of the church, and the blood-sealed unity of saints with God and each other has a missional goal. It indicates God's goal to unite all things in Jesus, things in heaven and things on earth at the fullness of time (Eph 1:10).

Moreover, confessing the forgiveness of sin involves the responsibility to proclaim this great good news for those who are still feel guilt, shame, fear, and every other symptom of their sinful condition and who are crying out from the burden of their sin.

Moreover, this fatherly image contains a deeper meaning which alludes to God's missionary nature. First, the fatherly image indicates the sovereign authority of God over His creation and the natural relationship between God and creation, and particular between God and mankind. Second, it indicates God's fatherly divine purpose and

fatherly compassion for man. Third, it reveals God's missionary heart as a father who wants to restore the broken relationship between Himself and His children, between humankind and creation, and His intention as a father to bless His children with His divine goodness, mercy, grace, and to give His kingdom to His children as their inheritance.

Furthermore, God's missionary nature is revealed in the Apostles' Creed by the sending His only Son Jesus Christ as a missionary in order for mankind to know Him as their Father and for Him to bestow His grace on His creation through Jesus' death and resurrection. "The New Testament sees Jesus as central to that self-revelatory dimension of God's mission."¹⁰ Jesus, God's only Son and incarnated God, made God known to us (Jn 1:18) and through the coming of Jesus, God's ultimate plan for the humankind has perfectly unfolded.

...it reveals God's missionary heart as a father who wants to restore the broken relationship between Himself and His children, between humankind and creation...

Also, the Apostles' Creed stated who Jesus is, His incarnation and birth, His atoning death and resurrection, His ascension, His position at the right hand of God, and the hope of His second coming. This confession, which depicts who Jesus is and His work for our redemption, also echoes His missionary nature and depicts Him as the one who is in the right hand of God and who intercedes for those not yet understand His redemptive work.

Similarly, the Apostles' Creed confesses the Holy Spirit including the belief in the person and the work of the Holy Spirit. This statement includes the promise and the coming of the Holy Spirit, which is missional. His presence on the earth and work in the church affirms God's missionary work through all generations until the fullness of time.

Finally, the Apostles' Creed reveals the holy Christian church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sin, the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting. The church, which was mandated in order to demonstrate God's presence among the people, is created to carry out God's mission. Also, the establishment of the church shows God's missionary nature and intent, "the *missio Dei* institutes the *missio ecclesiae*."¹¹ Also, the purpose of the communion of saints with God and with each other is missional, as the aroma of this communion invites others who are not yet in communion to join this fellowship of believers. Likewise, as the church confesses the forgiveness of sins, they are acknowledging the missionary nature of God and the responsibility to carry on His mission. Confessing the forgiveness of sin involves the

responsibility to proclaim this great good news for those who are still feel guilt, shame, fear, and every other symptom of their sinful condition and who are crying out from the burden of their sin.

The third article's final phrase, which confesses the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting, provides the ultimate hope given to the confessors by the death and resurrection of Christ. This confession also gives the church the confidence to proclaim the gospel, guaranteeing that believers and confessors of the Christian faith will have the hope of the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting after this earthly life. This confession of the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting especially comprises the essence of Christianity. It answers why Christianity is unique and why Christians are sent to preach the gospel. Also, it authenticates the missional motive beyond religious practice and expansion and transcends the Christian belief from the earthly life and motive. This statement puts the authenticity of other religions under examination. It gives Christians the guarantee and confidence to preach the gospel, as this message surpasses temporal concerns and grants them hope for everlasting life after death. Therefore, the Apostles' Creed's confession, both in general and in each of its articles, sentences, and phrases, declares the missionary nature of God and the missionary responsibility of the church and the confessors.

The First Article and God's Missionary Nature

The first article confesses, "I believe in God, the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth." In confessing God as the Father, as Almighty, and as Creator of heaven and earth, this article shows both a doctrinal and a missionary intent. As a doctrine, the article answers in whom one believes, who is God, and why one confesses Him as God.

"The confession that God is the almighty creator of heaven and earth sets the stage for everything that follows. It defines what makes God God. It locates the definition and identity of God within a narrative: God is the one who created everything that exists. If one did not create all that exists, then that person is not God—period!"¹²

In this first article, God's missionary nature and intent are described in each phrase, representing God as the God who is to be believed, as a Father Almighty, and as a Creator of heaven and earth. Hence, His missionary nature and intent are drawn from His being God, from His being a Father Almighty, Father of all creation and the Almighty one who redeemed and rescued His creation, the one who has sole-ownership and the right to redeem and re-create the world.

The Missionary God in the Second Article

The second article confesses the incarnation of the second person of the Holy Trinity, saying, "I believe In Jesus Christ, His only Son our Lord who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died and was buried." The birth of Jesus proclaims the fulfillment of God's promise given to Adam and Eve, the Old Testament Patriarchs, and Israel. Also, it echoes the accomplishment of the Old Testament prophecy and arrival of God's redemptive work which frees mankind from the burden of sin and guilt, which are greater bonds than slavery in Egypt and the oppression of any other earthly forces. Thus, Jesus's incarnation is the fulfillment and climax of God's missionary promise in the Old Testament and the commencement of the new missionary endeavors, which extend to all the nations.

The second article also declares Jesus Christ's suffering, death and resurrection, and ascension. Through His obedience, suffering, and death, God punished Adam's disobedience and its outcome of sin and death which created barriers between God and Adam, extending those divides to all generations of humanity. Jesus' suffering and death for the sake of mankind lifted God's wrath from mankind and satisfied God, fulfilling His promise and accomplishing God's redemptive act (Is 53). Thus, Jesus Christ's suffering, crucifixion, and atoning death for every sinner fulfilled the prophecy and assured the reconciliation of God with His creature, man. Jesus Christ has completed the redemption of the whole world. In Christ, the wall of sin that separates sinful humankind from the holy God have been dismantled. The incarnated Christ, who became sin for the sake of humankind, who died an atoning death for every sinner and victoriously rose again from the dead, fulfilled God's holy demands and reconciled humankind with God. In Jesus the whole world has been declared "not guilty" for their sin. Now, through the gospel, God issues the wonderful invitation to all people, 'Believe this good news and be reconciled.'¹³

Furthermore, the confession declares Jesus's resurrection from the dead, "The third day He rose again from the dead. He ascended into heaven and sits at the right hand of God, the Father Almighty." Jesus's resurrection vindicated His divinity, authenticating who He was and His authority in heaven and on earth. In His resurrection authority, the missionary Jesus, launched the Great Commission, sending His disciples to fulfill His mission and to proclaim the Good News, the Gospel, to all mankind and up to the end of the world, and making disciples of all the nations. "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 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 have commanded you. And

behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Mt 28:18-20). Likewise, His ascension and sitting in the right hand of God declared His divinity and authority in heaven and earth. Also, His being seated at the right hand of God is a witness of His active role to intercede for the redemption of all the world. Thus, Jesus is a missionary who was incarnated to fulfill the mission of the Triune God and who inaugurated the new epoch by His birth, atoning death, and resurrection.

Finally, the second article’s last sentence looks forward to His second coming and consummation, saying, “From thence He will come to judge the living and the dead.” Thus, the missionary God’s goal in the fullness of time is to unite all things in Jesus. The Lamb, who was slain will come again as judge with His divine authority culminating His missionary activity and uniting all things in heaven and things on earth under His authority.

Third Article and the Missionary God

The third article of the Apostles’ Creed confesses that “I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy Christian Church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. Amen.” It confesses who the Holy Spirit is and His missionary nature and actions which work through the holy Christian church and communion of saints. The Holy Spirit, the Third Person of the Holy Trinity, is also associated in this article with the forgiveness of sins and the resurrection of the body, as the Holy Spirit provides and confirms the forgiveness of sins and prepare saints for the resurrection of the body and for the life everlasting. So, the Holy Spirit is a missionary. He prepares the church for God’s mission and maintains the communion of saints for the missionary purpose. He forgives sinners and prepares them for the resurrection and life everlasting. Therefore, the ultimate goal of mission is preparing the saints for the life everlasting.

The third article also confesses the holy Christian church, which was inaugurated on the historic Pentecost Day by the manifestation of the Holy Spirit and communion of converted people when they heard the sermon of the Apostles. The church was inaugurated based on the promise of Jesus, “. . . I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it” (Mt 16:18). The church is established to carry out the Great Commission, to announce the mercy and goodness of God, to snatch generations from the gate of hell, and to proclaim God’s redemptive plan for mankind and restoration of creation.

Furthermore, the church is the assembly of all believers, where the gospel is purely preached, and the holy sacraments are purely administered according to the Word of God. “Therefore, in accordance with the Scripture we maintain that the church is, properly speaking, the assembly of saints who truly believe the gospel of

Christ and have the Holy Spirit.”¹⁴ Thus, the church—the mother of all saints—is missionary by her very nature.

The church was inaugurated to uphold God’s mission and established to last until the end of the world. Thus, the mission is her identity and primary responsibility. She will be kept alive for mission and live for the mission given to her by the missionary God.

The third article also confesses the communion of saints. The communion of saints is a gift given to the children of God as people born from one God and has a missional implication. God’s children are called to be sent, the gospel which said, “Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest” (Mt 11:28) also commissioned us to go and preach the Good News to all nations (Mt 28:18-20, Mk 16:15). The purpose of the communion of the saints is missional. As they come together in communion, they will be dispatched to witness wherever they are: in their neighborhoods, in the workplace, and to the ends of the world.

Likewise, the third article confesses the forgiveness of sins. The forgiveness of sin follows the gospel preaching and confession and absolution. This forgiveness of sin is granted for all the nations through the atoning death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. But, as Paul said, “[E]veryone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.’ How then

Thus, confessing the forgiveness of sins is a reminder of our responsibility to carry out the gospel and to reach the unreached.

will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? (Rm 10:13-14). Confessing the forgiveness of sins reminds us of our responsibility to carry out the gospel and to reach the unreached. Whenever Christians who are a part of the body of Christ’s church confess the forgiveness of sins they are reminded of the forgiveness of their own sins. But even more so, they are reminded of their responsibility to share the gospel with those who are not yet acquainted with the good news of the forgiveness of sins through the atoning death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Confessing the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting is the hope which neither any scientific nor technological and earthly advancement can grant us. Only the gospel of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ can give us this hope. This hope is also the driving force to partake in the missionary task and proclaim this good news for all the nations and for each person. Therefore, in the confession we see a missionary God and His mission which saves the whole world, the church, and God’s children.

Conclusion

The Apostles' Creed, which succinctly describe the Triune God, explicitly and implicitly describe Him as the Missionary God. This Creed introduces to us God the Father Almighty, the maker of heaven and earth, revealing the one who from the very beginning is missionary in nature, forming creation with a matchless love and mankind with His image and likeness. His missionary act was described when He breathed life into man, when He delegated humankind co-regent over His creation, and when He followed humankind after the fall with promised redemption.

Likewise, the Creed described Jesus Christ as the Son of God who was sent from heaven to the earth as a missionary; He came to accomplish God's eternal plan of salvation of mankind. He appeared as the one whose redemptive work is accomplished through His atoning death, resurrection, and ascension. Also, He is the one who gives us eschatological hope. His redemptive work unquestionably shows His missionary nature.

Similarly, the Creed described the Holy Spirit as the sustainer and accomplisher of the mission, as one who proceeds from the Father and the Son Jesus Christ, sent as a missionary to continue God's mission. He is the sustainer of the church, who equips God's children for God's mission. The Church is established and sent to carry God's mission. Likewise, confessing the communion of saints and the forgiveness of sins have missional implications.

God's Word, which is the final authority for the rule of faith and teaching of the church, is also a searching Word. God sent His Word to the world to accomplish His divine will and to redeem sinners. When it is proclaimed based on the Scripture, as a primary discourse, when it openly discloses God's unconditional promise to the sinner, then it affirms God salvific promise to sinners.¹⁵ When the Word of God is humbly accepted, it brings God's salvation wisdom to sinners and equips saints for God's mission and "good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them" (Eph 2:10).

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A Look at Religion in the 21st Century

Armand J. Boehme

Introduction

What does “religion” look like in the 21st century? Members of traditional religions (in this article using the word *traditional* to describe what Americans have understood by *religion*) might say that it looks pretty much the same as it had in the past.

But there are other voices that speak about the winds of change that have occurred for some in the religious realm in the latter half of the 20th century and on into the 21st century. One of the dramatic changes has been the understanding of religion itself.

An Overview of Some Materials

This essay will concentrate on books and materials, written for different purposes, which define or use the word *religion* in ways very different from the traditional understanding of that term. This changed use and definition of the term *religion* is often coupled with a perception of the lessening of the influence of religion in Western culture. The majority of the authors referenced (David Zahl, Juan Floyd-Thomas, Stacey Floyd-Thomas, Mark G. Toulouse, Rod Dreher, Tara Isabella Burton, and Steven Smith) are Christians.¹



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A. The first book is *Seculosity: How Career, Parenting, Technology, Food, Politics, and Romance Became Our Religion and What to Do about It* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2019). This book, authored by David Zahl, is about the exploding “marketplace in replacement religions.” (xii) Zahl writes that in recent times the word *religion* has come to have a different meaning than the traditional churchly one. Many today understand religion horizontally, centering on earthly things, rather than vertically, centering on God. Horizontal religion gives religious devotion to earthly things. Yet these horizontal religions still fasten on to the “promise of salvation.” (xiii)

Zahl believes that the religious needs of many today are being met by new horizontal religions described as busyness, romance, parenting, technology, work, leisure, food, and politics. Zahl laments the loss of a theology of God’s grace in Christ the Messiah.

Zahl’s understanding of horizontal religion is similar to Charles Taylor’s concept of an immanent frame. The immanent frame view largely dismisses the supernatural. What is important is what exists in this material world. Humans construct their lives for this world, not for any kind of transcendent good or in order to please any kind of God. People are primarily autonomous individuals who find their own individualistic and this-worldly spiritual or religious path. The immanent frame includes rigid moral positions which lack otherworldly transcendence and God.²

B. *The Altars Where We Worship: The Religious Significance of Popular Culture* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2016), written by Juan M. Floyd-Thomas, Stacey M. Floyd-Thomas, and Mark G. Toulouse, moves along the same lines as Zahl’s. This book looks at how sex, politics, business, entertainment, sports, science, and technology have become locations of religious meaning and cultural worship with their own spiritual narratives, teachings, ethics, and rituals. The religions of sex, politics, business and the rest are horizontal religions. The authors see the rise of these horizontal religions in relation to the fading influence of traditional religion.

C. The third book is *The Madness of Crowds: Gender, Race, and Identity* (London: Bloomsbury, 2021). In this book, Douglas Murray, a gay atheist, writes that for many, traditional religion no longer provides the “explanations for our existence.” (1) The void left by the fading influence of established religions is now being filled by “a new metaphysics” or “a new religion” which falls into the category of identity politics. (2) These identity politics are seen to have moral absolutes that are a secular way of identifying right and wrong. This form of rightness and wrongness includes an ethical view of life in this world, which echoes religious forms of right and wrong. The difficulty Murray sees is that the new metaphysics leaves little or no room for true forgiveness. (176–83) *The Madness of Crowds* was endorsed by both Sam Harris and Richard Dawkins. Murray like the Thomases and Toulouse, describes politics in a way that accords with Zahl’s definition of a horizontal religion.³

Others have echoed Murray’s concern about the lack of forgiveness in this world of “religion without religion.” Adherents of these “new secular religions” often see

their “fellow citizens” as “embodiments of sin” because they have different beliefs. Those holding different beliefs often receive swift and unforgiving judgment in this life.⁴ Joshua Mitchell writes that the current secular religious awakening is an awakening “without God and without forgiveness.” The desire to right wrongs remains, “but gone is the promise of forgiveness.” Thus, the “sense of guilt” remains.⁵

Another author writing about the politicization of the Christian faith has stated that when “the Christian faith is politicized churches become repositories not of grace but of grievances ... where aggression and nastiness are sacralized.”⁶

In addition to politics being given the aura of religion, George Marsden has noted that “political loyalties” can “create a religious like faith” that overtakes or “transforms a more traditional religious faith.”⁷

D: The fourth book is *Live Not by Lies: A Manual for Christian Dissidents* (New York: Penguin, 2020). In this book, Rod Dreher devotes an entire chapter to “Progressivism as Religion.” (47–68) This chapter is another illustration of the void created by the perception of the fading influence of traditional religions, which then is filled by an alternative belief system which has its own dogmas, morality codes, and outsiders or non-believers that it opposes. Again, politics is labeled a religion. Dreher references an essay by James A. Lindsay and Mike Nayna, “Postmodern Religion and the Faith of Social Justice,” which also speaks along these same lines.⁸ Though all of these authors might not see the religious nature of politics in the same way, the significant point is that they all see politics as a religion—a horizontal religion. The title of Dreher’s book comes from an essay by Alexandr Solzhenitsyn, “Live Not By Lies!”⁹

E: The fifth book is by Tara Isabella Burton, and is entitled *Strange Rites: New Religions for a Godless World* (New York: Hachette Book Group, 2020). Burton notes that many today see themselves as “creators of their own bespoke religions, mixing and matching spiritual and aesthetic and experiential and philosophical traditions.”(10) These people are looking for “a sense of meaning in the world” and for a “purpose” for their lives, a community to share their beliefs with, and “rituals to bring the power of [their] experiences into achievable, everyday life.” These individuals don’t want to receive doctrines, but to pick, purchase, or create them. They want to pick a spiritual path that feels authentic and meaningful for them. They look for “intuitional spirituality” rather than “institutional religion.” (10)

Burton states that “new gods are everywhere” today. They are visible in shared sacred texts films and programs like Harry Potter, Star Wars, and the Game of Thrones, There is the wellness culture, astrology, tarot cards, yoga, erotic dinner parties, and other this world-things that are sought out in order to “cultivate a sense of spiritual well-being.” (240) Burton writes about the gospel of self-care, and human productivity, and the powerful earthly doctrines of social justice and utopianism. She sees the “spiritual marketplace” as “overflowing” and the “new religious landscape” filled with self-expression, self-made spirituality, and self-betterment. This new

landscape includes writing one's "own script for morality, sexuality, and society" according to the dictates of one's own heart. (241) Burton believes that we currently do not live in a godless world, but in an "anti-institutional" world. (242)

Burton views certain political movements as replicating traditional religion when the adherents chant jointly shared semi-creedal words in unison, share common rituals, share a utopian vision of the world, and a sense of moral renewal. *Strange Rites* helps readers see the semi-religious meaning being given to earthly things that were previously understood as secular. She also writes about the influence of New Age (Eastern) religion in America. (22–46, 122–133)¹⁰

Burton refers to Steven D. Smith's book, *Pagans and Christians in the City* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2018) which sets forth the distinction between those who have the objects of their faith located "within this world" (horizontal religion) and traditional Christians whose faith is centered "outside" this world in a transcendent God (vertical religion). (Burton, 245)

How is it Expressed?

What is happening to religion and spirituality in the 21st century is that with the lessening of the influence of religion, especially Christianity, in American culture, many different "religions" or "spiritualities" have arisen. As one author noted, "In any given society, there is a relatively constant and finite supply of religious conviction. What varies is how and where it is expressed." If those convictions are not expressed through traditional religion, then they will be expressed in other ways—in politics, nationalism, parenthood, and in many other areas. The above works illustrate the reality of that thought. Many now have come to believe that "all deeply felt conviction" is a form of religion or spirituality which will fill the void left by the fading influence of traditional religion.¹¹ Thus many will express their religious convictions horizontally rather than vertically.

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Examples:

There are any number of other books which illustrate the changed definition of religion and the horizontal perspective of religion. One states that Darwinism is a religion.¹² Another speaks of sport as a religious phenomenon.¹³ Science fiction is seen to be imitating the sacred. One essay speaks about the spirituality of science fiction.¹⁴ Six of the science fiction-based religions that currently exist are studied in another book.¹⁵

One book speaks about science as a means of salvation.¹⁶ The spirituality of atheism is laid out in another.¹⁷ Contemporary sociology is viewed as a sacred project by another book.¹⁸ There are books which set forth the religious nature of politics, environmentalism, economics, and capitalism.¹⁹ Other books understand religion and spirituality to be devoid of any reference to God or any kind of supernatural creatures.²⁰ This movement to a more secular or worldly view of religion is one of globalization's effects on religion.²¹

One does not need to agree with all of the ideas in the above books and materials to see that all of them set forth the reality of a changed understanding of religion in American culture.

How to Respond:

The above materials, though written from different perspectives and for different purposes, illustrate the changed religious climate of America. Many people now understand the term "religion" in a more secular and godless way. The void left by the perceived fading influence of organized religion needs to be filled. The authors of the above materials see that void being filled by alternative religions, new religious movements, and religious substitutes that were traditionally understood to be secular in nature but have now been given metaphysical characteristics usually seen in more traditional religion.

The current changed religious climate needs to be responded to with sound Christian teaching and godly social action motivated by faith in Christ and love for the neighbor. Christ came into this world and dealt with both the spiritual and physical needs of human beings. The Christian church today needs to respond scripturally to the human conditions of the 21st century so that the religious void seen by many is filled with sound law/gospel preaching and teaching, and godly social action that addresses problems like racism, poverty, hunger, the environment, the relationship of science and religion, and the like.²² In these and other social causes Christians should seek to partner with those outside the faith to display a godly Christian lifestyle which includes responding to these problems, and which witness to the fact that the perceived void left by traditional religion is not a void at all—Christians are actively engaged in addressing the moral and social questions and problems of the day.

People today are looking for purpose for their lives, a community in which to feel a sense of belonging, and ways of addressing the needs like those noted above. The example of Christian believers addressing those needs in the public square is an evangelistic witness to God's love for all human beings in Christ the Savior, and provides godly examples of meaning and purpose in life from a traditional religious viewpoint. These things also witness to the authenticity of the Christian faith.

The Christian Church is truly a family, a community to which believers belong. The early Christians exhibited a communal understanding of community. (Acts 2:42–47) Even atheists have high praise for the expression of community seen among

Christians.²³ That sense of community needs to be cultivated and shared. The Christian Church truly has resources to help others and to address the world's needs, most notably the Gospel of God's love and forgiveness in Christ and the second great commandment of love for the neighbor. The church should offer these resources in a world which is growing more devoid of grace and forgiveness. Courses at the seminaries of our church body should include explanations of the changed religious climate and means of addressing those changes. Everything religious has not changed for the historic Christian faith still exists.

The Christian Church needs to seize this moment and to act boldly. It needs to teach the doctrine of justification and all other doctrines clearly and diligently. In its teaching and preaching, the church needs to emphasize the importance of living a Christian lifestyle that is consistent with the teachings of the Christian faith. There is also great importance to Christians understanding their social responsibilities in the world and their exercise of Christian ethics. Christians need to exhibit the uniqueness and importance of the Christian faith in the midst of the multiplicity of religions and spiritualities that exist today.

The Christian's lifestyle should include Christians exercising stewardship of the planet. There is also the need to exhibit a proper understanding of the sacred and the secular, that the Christian's life in this world is a holy calling and vocation in two kingdoms, and that the Christian has duties and responsibilities in both the church and the world. The truths of Holy Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions which nurture the faith of believers within the walls of the church need to be put into loving action out in the world. Christians are to be letting their lights shine in the world for the glorification of God. (Mt 5:16)

The Christian Church has historically been a church emphasizing missional outreach. From a traditional Christian perspective one can envision an impact on witnessing and evangelism as a result of the abovementioned changes to the definition of religion. Future Christian evangelists may hear this response: "Oh, you are talking to me about Jesus and Christianity. It is good that you have your own religion. I also have mine. My religion is my fitness regimen. It gives me purpose and meaning to my life." Will the church be trained to respond effectively?

Future Christian evangelists may hear this response: "Oh, you are talking to me about Jesus and Christianity. It is good that you have your own religion. I also have mine. My religion is my fitness regimen. It gives me purpose and meaning to my life." Will the church be trained to respond effectively?

The positive ways of responding noted above will not always happen, nor have they always occurred in the past. The reality of course is that no one in the Christian Church lives sinlessly. At times the world turns Christians upside down. Charity towards

others is at times lacking—the hungry are not fed, the naked are not clothed, the lonely are not visited. At times the atmosphere in congregations is marred by strife, and a community spirit is lacking. Putting one’s Christian faith into action is at times neglected. There is the need for daily contrition and repentance, and the daily need for the reception of God’s grace in Christ to pardon sins and enable more godly living.

Conclusion:

Christianity is a religion that is both horizontal and vertical. This is taught by the doctrine of the two kingdoms.²⁴ Christians have duties and responsibilities in this world and in the religious world. They are to serve God and their fellow human beings. Christ the transcendent God became a human being to live on this earth, to suffer and die for the sins of all human beings, to rise from the dead, and to enable human beings to live godly lives here and to dwell with Him in a holy state in heaven. God wants all to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth, and to have eternal life in heaven after this world.

Traditionally the Christian Church is understood to be comprised of those who have faith in Christ and the triune God and who gather around God’s Word and the sacraments. In worship Christians confess their sins and receive God’s justifying grace in Word and Sacrament. Thus, they are strengthened in their faith and empowered to live in the world, and to serve God and their fellow human beings by their godly lives. This serves as a witness to their Savior Jesus Christ in word and deed so that others would know of Christ and be saved.

As Christians serve in their various callings and vocations in the church and the world, they need to remember that the Christian Church is not an earthly political organization. Jesus said, “My kingdom is not of this world.” (Jn 18:36 NKJV)

Though the church is not an earthly political organization, it does exist to serve in the world to help meet the needs of a broken humanity. Jesus’ life is our example. He came into this world to help broken sinful human beings deal with earthly needs like hunger, nakedness, illness, and imprisonment, and He reminds all of His followers, “In as much as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me.” (Mt 25:40 NKJV)

Jesus’ ministry had one purpose – the redemption of sinners and the eternal salvation of lost souls. All that Christ did served that purpose. That purpose was ultimately accomplished by His death on Calvary’s cross, and by His glorious resurrection and an empty tomb. Therefore, all His Church does is for that purpose, “For the Son of Man has come to seek and to save the lost.” (Lk 19:10)

Endnotes

¹ The page numbers for the five main books in A-E are given in parentheses in the text.

² Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA & London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 539–593.

³ Contemporary politics has been given an “increasingly eschatological” character, “inspiring a secular Exodus” and “a secular Pentecost.” Matthew Rose, “Our Secular Theodicy,” *First Things* (December 2017 Number 278), 41.

⁴ Shadi Hamid, “America Without God,” *The Atlantic* (April 2021), posted online March 10, 2021. <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2021/04/america-politics-religion/618072/>; Sam Han, *Technologies of Religion: Spheres of the Sacred in a Post-secular Modernity* (New York: Routledge, 2016).

⁵ James F. Keating, “Woke Religion,” *First Things* (April 2021 – Number 312), 50. This is a review of Joshua Mitchell’s book, *American Awakening* (New York & London: Encounter Books, 2020).

Noted environmentalist, Michael Schellenberger wrote that religious environmentalism has become negative, angry, and fearful, and lacks kindness and forgiveness. Michael Schellenberger, *Apocalypse Never: Why Environmentalism Alarmism Hurts Us All* (New York: Harper, 2020). Graeme Green, “America Has Forgotten How to Forgive,” *The Atlantic* (posted March 19, 2021) <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2021/03/america-has-lost-ability-forgive/618336/>; Eric Spitznagel, “How social media has destroyed our ability to forgive” posted December 21, 2019. <https://nypost.com/2019/12/21/how-social-media-has-destroyed-our-ability-to-forgive/>; Tyrone Thompson, “It’s time We Talk About America’s Inability to Forgive Black Men,” posted December 12, 2019. <https://talkrealsolutions.com/its-time-we-talk-about-americas-inability-to-forgive-black-men/>

⁶ Peter Wehner, “The Evangelical Church Is Breaking Apart” *The Atlantic* (posted October 24, 2021) <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2021/10/evangelical-trump-christians-politics/620469/>. See also Stephen L. Carter, *God’s Name In Vain: The Wrongs and Rights of Religion in Politics*, Kindle edition (New York: Basic Books, 2009); Cal Thomas and Ed Dobson, *Blinded by Might* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999).

⁷ Wehner, “The Evangelical Church Is Breaking Apart.”

⁸ James A. Lindsay & Mike Nayna, “Postmodern Religion and the Faith of Social Justice,” *Areo* December 18, 2018; <https://areomagazine.com/2018/12/18/postmodern-religion-and-the-faith-of-social-justice/>

⁹ Alexandr Solzhenitsyn, “Live Not By Lies!” in Edward E. Ericson, Jr., and Daniel J. Mahoney, eds., *The Solzhenitsyn Reader: New and Essential Writings 1947-2005* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2012), 556–560.

¹⁰ For more on how Eastern and New Age beliefs have impacted religion and spirituality see David G Robertson, *UFOs, Conspiracy Theories and the New Age: Millennial Conspiracism* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016); Liselotte Frisk, “Globalization: A Key Factor in Contemporary Religious Change,” *Journal of Alternative Spiritualities and New Age Studies* 5 (2009), i-xiv; Theodore Roszak, *The Making of a Counter Culture: Reflections on the Technocratic Society and Its Youthful Opposition* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1969), 124–154. An example of the emphasis on this-world “theology” in the culture of Roszak’s day is: “This is the one and only firmament. The ways of this world are the ways of Heaven.” Roszak, *Counter Culture*, 129.

¹¹ Hamid, “America Without God.”

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¹² Michael Ruse, *Darwinism as Religion: What Literature Tells Us About Evolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017); Mary Midgley, *Evolution as a Religion: Strange Hopes and Stranger Fears* (London & New York: Routledge, 2002).

¹³ Eric Bain-Selbo & D. Gregory Sapp, *Understanding Sport as a Religious Phenomenon: An Introduction* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016).

¹⁴ Richard Grigg, *Science Fiction and the Imitation of the Sacred* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018); Armand J. Boehme, “The Final Spiritual Frontier? The Spirituality of Science Fiction,” *European Journal of Science and Theology* Vol. 14, No. 5 (October 2018), 15–24.

¹⁵ C.M. Cusack, *Invented Religions: Imagination, Fiction and Faith* (London & New York: Routledge, 2016). Cusack’s book includes the religion of Jediism, a science fiction-based religion that had its genesis in the Star Wars saga. Star Wars is one of the shared “religious” texts in our modern culture as Burton noted in her book, *Strange Rites: New Religions for a Godless World*. See E in the text above.

¹⁶ Mary Midgley, *Science as Salvation: A Modern Myth and Its Meaning* (London & New York: Routledge, 1996).

¹⁷ Sam Harris, *Waking Up: A Guide to Spirituality Without Religion* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2014); Armand J. Boehme, “The Spirituality of Atheism,” *Lutheran Mission Matters* Vol. 25, No. 1 (May 2017), 105–122.

¹⁸ Christian Smith, *The Sacred Project of American Sociology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

¹⁹ Emilio Gentile, *Politics as Religion*, trans. George Staunton (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006); Robert H. Nelson, *The New Holy Wars: Economic Religion Versus Environmental Religion in Contemporary America* (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 2010); Eugene McCarragher, *The Enchantments of Mammon: How Capitalism Became the Religion of Modernity* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2019).

²⁰ Ronald Dworkin, *Religion Without God* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013); Peter Heehs, *Spirituality Without God: A Global History of Thought and Practice* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019).

²¹ Frisk, “Globalization,” vii; Armand J. Boehme, Globalization and Religion: The Influential Six-Pack,” *Lutheran Mission Matters* Vol. 28, No. 1 (May 2020), 109–110.

²² *Racism and the Church: Overcoming the Idolatry* (St. Louis: A Report of the Commission on Theology and Church Relations, The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, February 1994); *Together With All Creatures: Caring for God’s Living Earth* (St. Louis: A Report of the Commission on Theology and Church Relations, The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, April 2010); *In Christ All things Hold Together: The Intersection of Science & Christian Theology* (St. Louis: A Report of the Commission on Theology and Church Relations, The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, February 2015).

²³ Alain de Botton, *Religion for Atheists: A Non-Believer’s Guide to the Uses of Religion* (New York: Vintage Books, 2013), 21–66. See also Bruce Sheiman, *An Atheist Defends Religion: Why Humanity Is Better Off With Religion Than Without It* (New York: Alpha Books, 2009), 1–46. These pages speak about the meaning religion gives to life and the sense of community it engenders.

²⁴ For an exposition of the doctrine of the two kingdoms see Paul Althaus, *The Ethics of Martin Luther*, trans. Robert C. Schultz (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1972), 43–83.

Encountering Mission

Singing a Song in a Strange Land: Music in Worship during the Pandemic

David L. Mennicke

The COVID-19 pandemic has altered every aspect of our lives throughout the world. For church musicians (and all who cherish gathering in musically expressive worship), a core element of life – singing the faith in community – ceases. Beyond the known fear associate with this Coronavirus, group singing was tarred by “super spreader” events such as the infamous Skagit Valley Chorus rehearsal in which nearly every member contracted COVID-19, with two dying.¹

Further professional research, including a study conducted by a group of professional musical and educational organizations indicated that the aerosol spread created by singing in enclosed spaces created a contagious environment.² Gathering in worship, particularly with singing, could no longer happen. These realities cast a dark pall over worshipping communities. Indeed, this pandemic has forced us into a modern-day Babylonian exile faced with this question: “How shall we sing the Lord’s song in a strange land?” (Ps 137:4 KJV)

I am involved in three communities that have answered the question in different ways: Bethlehem Lutheran Church, Twin Cities, a 3000+ member church in Minneapolis (ELCA), Jehovah Lutheran Church, a 150-member church in St. Paul (LCMS), and the Concordia University, St. Paul chapel and music department programming (LCMS) for its 5600 students (1700 residential). Each created new practices to try to continue meaningful worship and interpersonal connection. This article describes those practices, concluding with what has been learned and will be carried forward even after the pandemic ends.



Dr. David Mennicke has been the Director of Choral Studies since 1989 at Concordia University, St. Paul, where he is a Professor of Music, Coordinator of Music Ensembles, and Cantor for the University’s chapel worship. He has been the Director of the Bethlehem Chorale and Men’s Choir at Bethlehem Lutheran Church in Minneapolis since 1996. He is a member of Jehovah Lutheran Church in St. Paul, where he serves on the Board of Lay Ministry and volunteers as a musician.

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Bethlehem Lutheran Church quickly set up a livestream of Sunday worship services. The church had begun using cameras and recording equipment in the previous few years to project the service to overflow seating areas and record it for shut-ins; they had never done a livestream sharing of the service. Tapping into the expertise of technologically adept lay members, Bethlehem used their setup to video record services and share them live on a YouTube channel (with a recording available for later viewing). Prior to the service, there was an online Zoom invitation to a virtual “coffee hour” for people to connect. For the service itself, the only people present in the sanctuary were the preaching pastor, the recording technician, the organist, and one or two singers distanced in the balcony who sang the liturgy and hymns. Often a guest solo instrumentalist performed offertory music. Those viewing were invited to follow the service live and sing along on the hymns and liturgy at home. Communion was observed at home by parishioners using their own elements at home. The service was kept to a shortened length of no more than 45 minutes.

In the fall of 2020 through May of 2021, four of the adult music ensembles at Bethlehem each created a “virtual” performance about once a month for the offering music slot. Musical ensembles did not meet in-person to practice, but had weekly Zoom meetings to share devotions and prayer, vocalize, and practice music. This “practice” was done with mics muted and members listening to their parts being played with instructions given by the director; it was not possible to sing together with mics on because of the sound lag from each device. On their own time, individual musicians (choir singers or handbell players) video recorded their own performance of their parts at home on their phones while following a recording track created by the full-time church musicians, Maria Bucka and Mark Paisar. Dr. Paisar taught himself (via the internet) how to compile and edit all of these videos to create a final virtual recording to include in the livestream service. That editing took up to 40 hours for a 3-minute piece.

Jehovah Lutheran Church created weekly service recordings thanks to the expertise of Dr. Mark Schuler, a Jehovah member and professor at Concordia University, St. Paul. Director of Music Elizabeth Wegner and organist Timothy Buendorf organized a quartet of singers to audio record up to six weeks of service music at a time. The organist also recorded preludes and postludes for each service. Approximately once a month, Jehovah’s praise band ensemble recorded items for the service as well. Dr. Schuler video recorded the pastor, Dr. Joshua Miller, leading prayers, liturgy, and the homily. Lay readers sent video recordings of their readings from home. For offering music, the church used recordings of choral groups connected to Jehovah, notably the Concordia University, St. Paul Christus Chorus, the King of Kings Lutheran Church school choir and band from Roseville, MN (LCMS), and other resources. Dr. Schuler and Dr. Rhoda Schuler, the pro bono liturgist at Jehovah, then wove these recordings into a single service, using a variety of artwork as the background for audio music. The final recording was shared each Saturday on Jehovah’s YouTube channel for viewing at home at any time. The Eucharist was not observed in these distance services. In the fall of 2020, Jehovah offered a couple of parking lot “drive-through” communions. Bible Study continued

Sunday mornings online, and Mrs. Wegner led a weekly telephone chat for shut-ins.

Concordia University, St. Paul shared daily (Monday-Friday) twenty-minute chapel services live on the University YouTube channel. These were video recorded live and led at first by either the CSP Pastor, Tom Gundermann, or the CSP Ministry Associate, DCE Shelly Schwalm. The person leading these daily devotions shared a Bible reading, brief commentary, a song they led with guitar, and prayers. These services invited live chat commentary on the site. As the pandemic moved into the summer, both leaders led devotions on Tuesdays and Thursdays, sometimes inviting a guest such as the University President, Brian Friedrich.

In each setting, the response of worshippers offsite was one of gratitude. Worship attendance, at least in terms of YouTube views increased for each group. There was also an increase in people outside each institution's community.

Each of these communities eventually introduced in-person worship in different ways and time schedules. Bethlehem Lutheran hired a full-time technology professional to manage and oversee their service recordings. They remained in livestream-only services until April of 2021, when they opened to pre-registered worship with spacing and no congregational singing. Gradually over the summer, pre-registration was dropped, congregational involvement was added, and the choir returned to sing an anthem and support hymn singing on September 13. This fall, the church is doing the full sung liturgy with hymns as in pre-pandemic times, but with everyone masked and worshippers distanced in family groups. The Eucharist is shared with individual wafers and cups of wine or grape juice. Communion is also offered out of doors each Sunday after the final morning service.

Jehovah Lutheran Church reintroduced in-person worship services in mid-March of 2021, with no congregation or cantorial singing. Everyone is masked and distanced in a large sanctuary. From March through June, parishioners were required to pre-register online for services and submit a health screening/tracking form on arriving. The pastor preaches unmasked behind a Plexiglas shield, at least 25 feet away from parishioners. He is masked for the rest of the service. The Eucharist was shared with pandemic protocols. Hand sanitizer is available at the entrance to receiving the elements and the exit. The Pastor is masked

Gradually through the spring and into the summer, vaccinated cantors began singing an abbreviated liturgy and one or two hymns. By August, the congregation was singing the communion liturgy and final hymn in the service.

and distributes the host from an extended hand (initially using a "Pez"-like dispenser) and parishioners then move a few feet away to consume it. They move on to a station several feet away to pick up and consume an individual cup of wine (in the spring filled from a squeeze bottle; in the summer, pre-filled cups). Gradually

through the spring and into the summer, vaccinated cantors began singing an abbreviated liturgy and one or two hymns. By August, the congregation was singing the communion liturgy and final hymn in the service. The church celebrated its traditional “Baroque Cantata” Sunday in early August with a masked choir of twelve singers and organ in the balcony weaving the Vivaldi *Gloria* into the liturgy. Jehovah’s plan is to add the congregational singing of the Hymn of the Day in early October, with a return to the full liturgy with hymns sung by the assembly and choir for Reformation Sunday. This plan could change based on the pandemic.

After being entirely online from March 15 through the summer, Concordia University, St. Paul shifted to in-person classes (along with hybrid and online instruction) in September 2020 for its fall semester. COVID-19 case counts remained low throughout the year, with zero on-campus transmissions. Chapel services followed these protocols in the fall semester and through mid-February 2021:

- Distanced, masked worshippers
- Speakers behind a Plexiglas shield, 25 feet from the nearest worshipper
- Services limited to 30 minutes or less (usually 20 minutes)
- No congregational singing
- Soloists or small ensembles (up to 4 singers) for brief liturgy responses, hymn verses, or praise songs, distanced and masked
- Choirs distanced and masked from an adjoining narthex on microphones, with the sound broadcast into the sanctuary
- Weekly communion services for small groups (fewer than 10 people), with distancing, masking, and no singing; bread and wine from pre-packaged, individual cups with a wafer in a sealed package on top of the cup

The chapel hosted a livestreamed Lessons and Carols Service in December 2020. Handbells, a six-member vocal jazz ensemble, and a chamber string ensemble performed short pieces in the chapel proper, with small ensembles from the Concert Band performing in the adjoining narthex. Carols were sung by masked soloists from the balcony with organ. By mid-February, the assembly was invited to sing one or two verses of a final hymn for the service, allowing people the opportunity to leave before the hymn if they were not comfortable with that situation.

After their complete shutdown in spring 2020, the music ensembles at Concordia, St. Paul returned to live rehearsals in fall 2020. Choirs wore specially tailored singers’ masks, distanced six feet apart. Rehearsals were limited to 30 minutes in one room, after which the choirs shifted to another room. The choir members also signed a “Mutual Covenant” promising to adhere to CDC and University COVID-19 guidelines. All ensembles did much of their rehearsal broken up into smaller ensembles in the fall semester.³ The choirs, Handbell Ensemble, Chamber Ensemble, and university organist recorded Christmas music in mid-October. Dr. David Mennicke collated these recordings with Bible readings, still-

life artwork, and video clips to produce an online Christmas concert released in early December. All the video editing was done by Concordia's chapel choir director, Prof. Shari Speer.

In the spring 2021 semester, groups moved to more frequent full ensemble rehearsals, while still masking (for singers) and distancing in 30-minute segments (for all groups). Concordia's concert choir, the Christus Chorus, video-recorded 13 short pieces and an 18-minute semi-staged segment of the Schütz *Passion According to St. John*. All these public domain pieces were shared with Concordia's church constituency to use for free in their own worship services. Over 60 churches in the region made use of these videos on multiple occasions, obtaining a much broader outreach than they would have achieved in a live concert tour. Jubilate, Concordia's chapel choir, created a pre-recorded Easter Vespers service that was compiled by their conductor, Professor Speer. Non-aerosol-producing instrumental ensembles and soloists put on live concerts for small, invited audiences. Wind ensembles and soloists shared livestreams of their concerts.

In the current 2021-22 academic year, Concordia's chapel has slightly opened its practice from last spring. The main speaker in chapel is no longer behind a shield but is at least 30 feet distant from the assembly. Small ensembles are performing in the chapel sanctuary masked and distanced. The congregation is singing at least one hymn or worship song in each service, as well as any sung or spoken liturgy in these 20-minute devotional gatherings.

While we are sadly still in the pandemic and do not know when it will cease, there have been some positive take-aways from this time. The most gratifying learning is how much people have wanted to stay connected to music and worship. They have appreciated the efforts pastors and musical leaders have made to share meaningful worship services and music. They have eagerly availed themselves of the limited opportunities to make music and/or to be in community. As a college professor, I was particularly struck at how resilient and positive the students have been. Even with the "glamour" activities of tours and concerts taken away, these young people remained involved, seeking out and cherishing the opportunities they did have to make music and be in community.

Another positive was the effectiveness of each institution's COVID-19 mitigation strategies and adherence to them, which led to limited infections. Bethlehem, being a larger community, has had a few cases but is much better off than the national average. Jehovah has had no cases. Concordia University's testing was consistently around a 1% infection rate, and case numbers on campus were below 25 at any given time (usually in single digits). Concordia had no on-campus transmission and no serious cases or deaths from COVID-19.

Another plus has been the expansion of ministry and outreach because of technology. Each institution described here was forced to creatively develop their video/audio recording, livestreaming, and social media presence. The result in each case was a broader outreach than they would have had in normal times. Concordia and Bethlehem are continuing to livestream their services—a benefit for those who are homebound and the many who remain uneasy about being in public places. Technology has been a tool for service and connection—even at a distance.

Each institution described here was forced to creatively develop their video/audio recording, livestreaming, and social media presence. The result in each case was a broader outreach than they would have had in normal times.

Of course, there are downsides to this time, apparent now and potentially in the future. People have grown accustomed to the convenience of worship at home, so it may prove challenging to bring them back to in-person services. The pandemic has further revealed, and exacerbated, the political and social divisions of our country and the world at large. The great irony is that more liberal churches with higher vaccination rates (and thus higher protection from COVID-19) tend to be more reluctant to worship in-person, operating from a position of fear that can leave some members feeling incapacitated and frustrated. I know of colleagues (particularly on the coasts) who have barely left their homes for over a year. Conservative churches tend to have a higher percentage of vaccine distrusters and a lower observance of government encouraged (or mandated) health safety guidelines in worship. Such dispositions lead to higher rates of COVID-19 infection. In my opinion, neither extreme is healthy.

Even so, my hope is that we come out of this pandemic with realizations that can lead to better and more faithful ministry. We have found that technology can be a wonderful gift in enhancing and expanding worship presentation. Therefore, we should continue to make use of it when it can further the Kingdom of Christ. We have also found that human beings—creatures made in the image of God—reflect the incarnate and communal nature of the Trinity. The emptiness and longing wrought by the pandemic have shown us that we *must* gather in community, in the flesh, to fully be the Body of Christ. In the Service of Word and Sacrament that God has gifted to the world, our shared physical presence—reinforced by the joy and unity of group singing—is a palpable confirmation of Emmanuel, God dwelling with us. May we rejoice in and share out this power, truth, and beauty of God’s sanctuary as “God’s Church of living stones”!⁴

Solo Deo Gloria

Summary of Pandemic Worship Formats at Three Twin Cities Sites

	Bethlehem Lutheran Church Twin Cities (Minneapolis, Minnetonka)
March - August 2020	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No in-person worship • Livestream broadcast of worship service on YouTube (worship leaders only, masked, distanced) • No music ensembles
September 2020-March 2021	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No in-person worship • Livestream broadcast of worship service on YouTube (worship leaders only, masked, distanced) • Virtual recordings of music ensembles
April - June 2021	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pre-registered in-person worship, masked, distanced, no singing • Livestream broadcast of worship service on YouTube (worship leaders only, masked, distanced) • Virtual recordings of music ensembles
July - August 2021	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No pre-registration, in-person worship, masked, distanced assembly singing • Livestream broadcast of worship service on YouTube continues • No music ensembles (live soloists)
September 2021-	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In-person worship, masked, distanced with assembly singing • Livestream broadcast of Worship service on YouTube continues • Choir, ensembles return

	Jehovah Lutheran Church (St. Paul)
March - August 2020	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No in-person worship • Pre-recorded services released on Saturday on YouTube • Organist, vocal quartet record hymns & liturgy (mask, distance) • No Eucharist
September 2020-March 2021	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No in-person worship • Pre-recorded services released on Saturdays on YouTube • Organist, vocal quartet record hymns & liturgy (mask, distance) • Two drive- through communion
April - June 2021	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pre-registration and screening • In-person worship, masked, distanced, no singing • Pre-recorded services released on Saturdays on YouTube • Vaccinated, mask, distance cantors sing communion liturgy, hymns • Eucharist in-person (COVID protocols)
July - August 2021	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No Pre- registration and screening • In-person worship, mask, distance, assembly sings communion liturgy, last hymn • Pre-recorded services end • Cantors lead liturgy, assembly communion liturgy, final hymn • Eucharist in-person (COVID protocols)
September 2021-	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In-person worship, mask, distance assembly singing gradually increase to full by October • No pre-recorded services • Choir (mask, distance) return by Oct. 31 • Eucharist in-person (COVID protocols)

	Concordia University (St. Paul)
March - August 2020	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1-2 worship leaders 20-minute devotions on YouTube • No ensemble music • No Eucharist
September 2020 - March 2021	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In-person community worship, masked, distanced, assembly singing begun mid-Feb. 2021 • Livestream on YouTube continued • Choirs mask, distance from adjoining room with miked sound in sanctuary • Wednesday morning Eucharist for fewer than 10 people, mask, distance, pre-packaged elements, one verse of hymn sung
April – June 2021	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In-person community worship, mask, distance assembly singing at end of service, then moved to summer chapel in May • Livestream on YouTube through April • Small choirs, dance, ensembles in chapel • Wednesday morning Eucharist • Two Eucharist services in regular chapel, pre-packaged elements, no singing, no Eucharist in summer
July – August 2021	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Summer chapel in person (indoors and outdoors) • No livestream of summer chapels • No ensembles in summer chapels • No Eucharist in summer
September 2021 -	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In-person community worship, masked, distanced, assembly singing • Livestream chapel services YouTube • Small ensembles, soloists/cantors in chapel proper, large ensembles adjoining room and in chapel

	Concordia University (St. Paul)
September 2021-	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Wednesday morning Eucharist, Two Eucharist services in chapel with pre-packaged elements, sing one hymn, short liturgy

Additional resources for dealing with music performance in groups during the pandemic can be found at the American Choral Directors Association website at:

<https://acda.org/resources-for-choral-professionals-during-a-pandemic>

Endnotes

¹Report from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, <https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/69/wr/mm6919e6.htm>

²May 5, 2020 webinar hosted by The National Association of Teachers of Singing, the American Choral Directors Association (ACDA), Chorus America, Barbershop Harmony Society, and Performing Arts Medical Association (PAMA), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DFI3GsVzj6Q>

³ These practices were highlighted in a 7-minute news segment on KSTP TV's *Nightcast* in November 2020 <https://kstp.com/minnesota-news/how-the-concordia-covenant-helped-save-the-music-during-a-pandemic/5923269/?cat=12584>

⁴ From stanza 3 of "Built on the Rock the Church Doth Stand," text by Nikolai Fredrik Severin Grundtvig (1783- 1872), tr. Carl Döving (1867-1937).

Is Online Ministry the ‘Gospel Blimp’ of Today’s Church?

Vernon E. Wendt Jr.

Telling the Good News in These End Times

After showing His glorified body to others forty days after His resurrection, Jesus ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Heavenly Father. We can imagine what was going through the minds of the apostles when Jesus ascended to heaven before their very eyes, and a cloud hid Him from their sight.

We infer from Acts 1:10 that they were so in awe of Jesus’ ascension into the clouds, that for a while at least, they simply stared up into the sky, wondering if their eyes were playing tricks on them. And where did Jesus go? But, then suddenly two angels appeared to them, saying, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven” (Acts 1:11).

And I wonder if the angels are asking a similar question of us today as they asked the apostles at our Lord’s ascension. Why are we spending so much time on trivial matters, as individuals and as a church, when there are people dying and going to hell all around us every day? The question is especially important when we consider our failure to “Go, while telling the Good News of the Gospel” to others.

We who are living in these End Times have been called to be the body of Christ on this earth in His stead. Likewise, 2 Corinthians 3:2 indicates that we are to be living letters of God’s Word for all to read, showing clearly our love for God and our love for our neighbor. While the Church celebrates the Ascension of our Lord as a sign of God’s ultimate victory over everything evil, the descension of the Holy Spirit impresses on us that the Church will continue to be in our world as an unsettling community until the Lord returns.



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Is the Body of Christ Absent or Present?

But how can we possibly be the body of Christ when we've been told for the past year and more to keep our distance from each other? How do we in this unsettling situation demonstrate the presence of the Lord both inside and outside of the church's walls?

One of the ways is to continue to receive God's means of grace for the forgiveness of our sins by being in regular worship, so that we might be a spigot of God's grace to others and not merely a sponge by keeping the Good News of the Gospel to ourselves. And we seek the Holy Spirit's counsel and direction, showing us how we might communicate the Gospel in meaningful and effective ways to others.

Given the social distancing challenges, however, churches have had to modify their usual ways of administering God's Word and Sacraments. On top of this, we've had to wrestle with keeping the fourth commandment, as well as first and third commandments, while being in a nationwide lockdown, having to observe local restrictions, indoor mask mandates, etc. By far, the most difficult challenge I've faced has been being barred from visiting members in the hospitals and nursing homes when spiritual care is of the essence. However, with the aid of my iPhone, I've been able to make some virtual visits, when barred from being present in the body.

And yet, the efficacy of God's means of grace remains the same, no matter how unique the liturgical adaptations and practices we've had to make in their administration. The barriers created by the coronavirus pandemic have served to heighten the importance of making bridges in order that Jesus might continue to serve us today through His Word and Sacraments.

An analogy has been made between how God used the roads built in ancient Rome to spread the Gospel in the early church, so He would have today's church use the information highway (i.e., the internet) to spread the Gospel today.

No doubt, the internet can be an effective tool for us to use in communicating the Gospel beyond the four walls of a building. And I'm thankful that we can share our Christian faith with others literally around the world and communicate the Good News that Christ died for sinners, like you and me, in this unique way.

But we should also keep in mind that the most effective way to do evangelism is when we are personally involved in people's lives, just as our Savior was when He walked the earth, and not by simply posting a message while hiding behind our cell phones or computer screens.

Is the Internet Today's "Gospel Blimp"?

There's an old movie called *The Gospel Blimp* that came out in 1967 that applies to the "online-connected" churches of today. The movie is based upon a book written

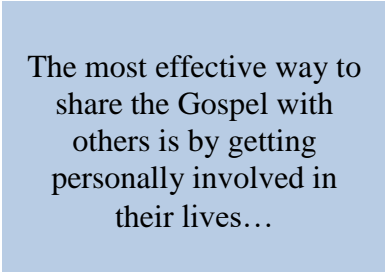
by Joseph Bayly in 1960 entitled, *The Gospel Blimp (and Other Parables)*¹. In the opening scene, a group of Christians are discussing *how* they might share the Gospel with their neighbors. For example, their neighbors next door drink beer and skip church on the weekends (except for Christmas and Easter). That behavior causes the group to reason that they aren't true Christians like they are, even though they hardly even know them.

Suddenly a blimp appears in the sky, and as they look up into the sky, they get what they think is a brilliant idea for sharing the Gospel. They would raise enough funds to purchase a blimp that people could easily see in the sky with a sign trailing behind it that would broadcast a message from the Bible from a loudspeaker. In addition, they would “fire bomb” gospel tracts from the blimp all over the community. No longer would they have to worry about having awkward over-the-fence conversations with neighbors or investing their time and energy in building a relationship with them. The blimp would take care of everything.

Their focus on the Gospel blimp, however, not only has a negative effect on their family life, it ultimately ends up distracting them from personally witnessing to their neighbors, even those next door. Their “brilliant idea” of having a Gospel blimp was not so brilliant after all.

Evangelism Is Personal

The most effective and meaningful way to share the Gospel with others is by getting personally involved in their lives, befriending them, listening to them, praying with them and for them, talking with them, constantly pointing them to Jesus, and inviting them to be a part of a local church, where the means of grace and Christian fellowship can be found.



The most effective way to share the Gospel with others is by getting personally involved in their lives...

Indeed, according to a survey that I recently conducted of ninety-one youth ranging from 12–18 years old, there seems to be a yearning for a more interactive style of worship. The impact of the impersonal nature of the internet, may have led to a preference for face-to-face contact. The implication is that today's youth don't want to merely be on the receiving end of hearing and learning God's Word. They also want to be actively engaging in a community that ponders together the very Lutheran question, “What does this mean?” in application to their lives.

Evangelism is not for the weak. At times it can get messy. Being rejected and misunderstood, having to patiently listen to others' gripes and complaints when you'd rather not, and going out of your way to show compassion upon others can be very

challenging. It reminds us of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10) who showed compassion upon the man who fell among robbers, rather than avoiding him in his need like the priest and Levite did. And ultimately, evangelism involves following our Savior's example by fully immersing ourselves into the lives of others.

Application for Today's Church

And so, I ask you, as fellow missionaries of the Gospel:

1. Who is on your prayer list that God the Holy Spirit is prompting you to share the Gospel with today?
2. And how might you personally become incarnational in their lives, as the hands and feet of Jesus to them?

Perhaps you could start by simply making a phone call, where you really mean it when you ask them, "How are you doing?" along with "How can I pray for you?" and then offer a listening ear. Or try writing a personal letter or card, befriending a stranger in your neighborhood as you take a walk or at the local market, as well as getting even closer to those you already do know. As you actively engage with others, the Holy Spirit will open doors for you to share with them the reason for your hope, peace, and joy, in the midst of these chaotic times.

Above all, you can give to others the love of Jesus that you have first received from Him. And the most loving thing we can do for our neighbor is to tell them the Good News of the Gospel that they might have forgiveness and eternal life.

Conclusion

Online ministry is here to stay and today's Church is undergoing a significant change as we seek to successfully merge and keep pace with the information highway in spreading the Gospel. But we should also keep in mind that evangelism does not consist of merely posting a video, writing a blog, and hiding out behind a screen. Instead, it also involves going beyond the screen and into the lives of the people around us, as we personally look for ways and opportunities to share with them the Good News that also today Jesus seeks and receives sinners!

Endnotes

¹ Joseph Bayly, *The Gospel Blimp* (Haverstown, PA: Windward Press, 1960).

Reviews

VIRUS AS A SUMMONS TO FAITH: Biblical Reflections in a Time of Loss by Walter Brueggemann. Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2020. 80 pp. Paperback. \$14.00.

Virus as a Summons to Faith is a book written for both scholars and lay Christians asking questions about God, COVID-19, and Christian responsibilities. It was written and published in two weeks. This was in mid-2020, at the time when the world was still trying to figure out the full scale of crisis caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus. Even though the book is short (80 pages), it is content-rich, and is a book that world Christians need to read and use to encourage each other during these times.

The book mainly explores questions that most people have probably been asking during this difficult time of COVID-19: Is this pandemic a curse from God? How are we to understand our situations through the lens of Scripture? What is God up to in/through such a global crisis? Brueggemann responds to these questions, focusing on how to move forward with greater faith. To help readers connect their faith to these questions, he carefully guides them through stories of pandemic and plague in the Old Testament.

Brueggemann discusses three interpretative options for Christians to use when exploring questions related to the coming of a “plague”: transactional, purposeful enactment, and enacted in freedom. What he refers to as the *transactional* interpretation of events is a *quid pro quo* reaction from God. According to this view, the cause for crisis is forsaking and disobeying God. One example was God’s reaction to the Israelites’ disobedience, as we read in some Old Testament texts such as Deut. 28:20–34. Here the people were punished because they “have forsaken [Him]” (Deut 28:20). It is possible to view the current pandemic as such a response from God.

The second interpretative lens is “YHWH’s purposeful enactment of force in order to implement the specific purpose of YHWH” (5). According to this view, God “mobilize[s] the various elements” in order to execute His purposes for creation (5). Based on the book of Exodus, Brueggemann discusses how God explains the divine purposes portrayed behind such specific actions as the ten plagues that had devastating impact on the land of Egypt. The purpose behind such actions of God was the liberation of the people of Israel and bringing them out of Egypt—for YHWH is the God of Israel.

His third interpretive lens refers to “YHWH’s holiness enacted in freedom” (10). According to this view, the capacity of human beings to comprehend God’s actions is questioned, particularly in relation to God’s sovereignty (Is 55:8). Brueggemann defines some actions of God as arising from “the sheer holiness of God that can enact in utter freedom without reason, explanation, or accountability, seemingly beyond any purpose at all” (10). The story of Job is an example. The reason for Job’s suffering and Job’s questions related to the cause of his suffering are not explained (Job 38–41), yet they cause Job to recognize that he is not God.

This book is both scholarly and pastoral. It is intended for preachers and leaders of the church, and yet it is a great resource for devotional use in congregations as well as for families. At this difficult time, when families are dealing with loss of their beloved ones, recovering from the virus, and/or going through other related difficulties caused by the virus, it helps them think about how they can still trust in God and live faithfully. Brueggemann ends each chapter with a psalm-like prayer, which makes it more relevant for devotional use.

Samuel Deressa

WHERE IS GOD IN A CORONAVIRUS WORLD? by John C. Lennox. London and Charlotte, NC: The Good Book Company, 2020. 64 pp. Paperback. \$5.99.

John Lennox is Emeritus Professor of Mathematics at the University of Oxford, but he is more widely known as a Christian apologist. He has written several books about religion, science, and atheism, and he has debated atheists like Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, and Michael Shermer. This short book, written in the first few months of the coronavirus pandemic, falls into the area of apologetics. It is an extended answer to the question put in the title: “Where is God in a coronavirus world?” Lennox asks readers to imagine they are sitting in a coffee shop and have put this question to him. This is how he would have answered at that moment.

Lennox treats this question as an instance of the pressing and recurring problem of natural evil, that is, as the problem that pain and suffering in the world make for believing in loving and powerful God (13–14). So, he interprets the question as, “[C]an the coronavirus be reconciled with the existence of a loving God?” (31)

Many find the problem of evil to be a compelling reason *not* to believe in God. Lennox deals with this challenge by arguing that atheism cannot help. Certainly, the problem of evil is a challenge to belief in God. But Lennox points out, “Removing God from the equation does not remove pain and suffering. It leaves them untouched. But removing God does remove something else—namely, any kind of ultimate hope” (31).

Still, the question remains about how to reconcile the loving God with pain and suffering. Lennox’s initial answer is a common one: God granted free will to human beings. Free will is “one of the greatest gifts” because it “opens up wonderful things: love, trust, and genuine relationship with God and each other” (36). But this gift also “makes us capable of evil” (36), and it left “a possibility of moral breakdown through the misuse of that freedom” (37). And evil and moral breakdown did indeed come about when Adam and Eve disobeyed God. Sin and death came into the world, and “nature itself was fractured by that same event” (39). The result has been and continues to be “thorns and thistles, backbreaking labour, pests, disease, epidemics, droughts, famines, earthquakes, volcanoes, and so on—coupled, sadly, with the destructive forces unleashed by selfishness, greed and moral corruption” (40).

Human free will is an unsatisfying response to the problem of evil. The reason is evident even to children. One of my own, sitting in the back seat of a car and chattering about one thing after another, suddenly popped this question: “Dad, why did God let sin in the world?” “That’s a good question,” I remember replying. “God only knows.” He understood that God is in control of everything, even sin. If sin weren’t somehow God’s will, it wouldn’t be. The only question is “Why?” Human creatures are responsible for their sins and their sinfulness. But creatures are creatures. Who they are and what they do is always subject to the will of the Creator. So, even when holding wicked spirits and sinful human beings responsible for evil does not reconcile the loving God with pain and suffering, on top of evil, sin, and death.

Lennox, in the end, seems to sense this. First, he notes that “we can debate for ever what a good, loving and all-powerful God should, could or might have done. But experience shows that none of us has ever been satisfied with the outcome of that particular discussion” (42). Second, he turns from rational argument to “the core of Christian teaching,” which is Jesus Christ and what he has done and what he will do when he returns. Lennox stresses that Christ came to be the judge of the living and dead, as Paul preached on Mars Hill. This means that there will justice in the end, and this fact “guarantees that there will eventually be an ultimate answer to the deepest human questions” (46). Justice, however, also means judgment that should fall against all sinners. But Christ came to save sinners, Lennox reminds readers, offering forgiveness, peace with God, new life, and the promise of a world to come.

The book concludes with several recommendations for Christians in response to the coronavirus pandemic. Heed the best medical advice. Maintain perspective in the face of this trouble. Show love to the neighbor even if it threatens our own health and life. Remember eternity awaits believers. And, for those who have endured loss, press on with “the climb,” that is, press on as Paul did.

I am writing this review about a year and a half after Lennox wrote the book. A lot has happened in and with the pandemic in the meantime. But the book is still relevant, because the coronavirus is only the occasion for reflecting on a perennial problem. He wrote the book in about a week, and so there are, as he puts it, “some rough edges and inadequacies.” Lennox apologized for them, but I still should identify a few of the inadequacies. One concerns his argument from free will, which I already dealt with. Another is that he does not look to Jesus’ own ministry. Jesus dealt with the problem of evil head on. He cast out unclean spirits, forgave sinners, and preached the good news. He healed the sick, cleansed lepers, gave sight to the blind, and raised the dead. These works were central to his mission, as he said when John the Baptist wanted to know whether he was the one to come (Mt 11:2–6). Lennox is right to turn to Jesus Christ as the Christian response to the problem of evil. But his account of Christ would have been stronger had he brought Christ’s ministry into the picture. Third, Lennox does not bring explicit proclamation of the gospel into the picture, and he does not appear to have any place for the gospel in its different forms. No place for Baptism as God’s act to make someone his child. No place for giving the Body and Blood of the Lord as signs of God’s favor. No place for Absolution. Yes, there is a place to talk about God’s forgiveness and promises. But Lennox’s account has no place for actually forgiving sinners, for promising the hopeless in Christ’s name or for giving concrete signs of God’s grace for those who want a sign from God.

Nevertheless, the book is worth reading and discussing. The book has inadequacies, but they do not render it a failure. Once again, Lennox asks readers to treat the book as an answer given in a conversation. It is an intelligent, honest answer, dealing with a problem that never goes away. And it is an answer that invites further conversation and reflection. We could use more answers like this.

Joel Okamoto

WE WILL BE CHANGED: Questions for the Post-Pandemic Church. Edited by Mark D. W. Edington. New York: Church Publishing Incorporated, 2020. xviii+93 pp. Paperback. \$9.95.

This book is one of the church's early responses to the challenges of the pandemic. It appeared in print in November of 2020, and so the essays it contains were written in the middle of 2020, not long after the pandemic reached America. Christians were in the process of learning Zoom and were starting to face the challenges of survival in a radically changed world.

The book is intended in the first place for an Episcopal audience. The editor, Mark D. W. Edington, has brought together 16 Episcopal scholars who each contribute a short essay about change and the need for change in a world affected by the coronavirus. Edington is himself the bishop of the Convocation of Episcopal Churches in Europe, and the authors hold roles in the academic world as well as leadership roles in research institutes and other organizations that contribute to the life of the church.

The purpose of the book is to get discussion started about what the church should do next in a world that indisputably has been changed by the coronavirus. This is not a book about specific solutions or models of ministry that could be tried. It understands that the Anglican-Episcopal world is too diverse for that, but it is fully convinced that solutions can be found, that experimentation is necessary, that the life of the church will be different and yet the same, for God is at work among his people through Word and Sacrament.

A key point of departure is the recognition that it is not the virus that changed the world. Virtually all of the challenges were there before the pandemic. What the pandemic has done is accelerate the changes that were already at work in society. Possibly, this is the way God calls the attention of his people to their already-existing need for change.

A continuing emphasis throughout the book is the need for Christians to examine again how much of the life of the church is determined by cultural expectations and is, therefore, negotiable. Culture changes all the time. The church must continually ask itself what it must say and do in its changed context to faithfully communicate God's gift of salvation.

In dealing with a world so full of uncertainty, the book's emphasis is that a new kind of leadership—yet a leadership that Jesus himself modeled and taught—is needed. A leadership that has all the answers and imposes them by invoking authority is not likely to be helpful. But a leadership, guided by God that asks questions and listens to answers even when they dispute well-loved assumptions and is willing to speak the truth in love, may help the church to find its way in this new world.

This is a book written by Episcopalians for Episcopalians. That world is not identical with the Lutheran world, but they share Lutheran struggles to find the way of

being church in these changing times. It is a worthwhile exercise to reflect on what they have learned about the road ahead.

Daniel L. Mattson

CORONAVIRUS AND CHRIST. John Piper. Wheaton: Crossway, 2020. 112 pp. Paperback. \$8.99.

Piper's goal in *Coronavirus and Christ* ("C&C") is to show readers who feel as if they are being drowned by the raging seas of the pandemic, why Christ is their rock and what it is like to stand on his love (19).

Piper makes some constructive observations about the pandemic and Christian faith. He obviously knows God's love in Jesus and trusts deeply in him. His conviction is apparent throughout the book. In the second half of C&C, Piper gives six answers to what God is doing through the coronavirus (61–98). Here he makes some useful observations about the theological significance of the pandemic that are important for people to consider. For example, he urges readers to interpret the pandemic as a sign pointing to the Final Judgment and a warning to repent before it is too late (73–86). Piper appropriately assumes God's omnipotence and sees the coronavirus as the work of his hands. This is a daunting truth for many Christians to consider.

But there are problems with C&C that make it difficult for me to recommend. The foremost is that, despite the title of the book, Piper does not seem to understand that the most important Word that people suffering in the pandemic need to hear is the Word of promise that God has given us in his Son and especially that Word of promise that must come from the lips of a preacher. (What better place is there to hear it?) Instead, Piper puts the Word, referring to the Bible, at the center of his focus. Thus, he uses the second chapter to defend the integrity of the Scriptures as God's Word that we can trust. Such a defense has its place in certain contexts. However, not only is the chapter unclear, but I am not sure how it helps people who are actually suffering in the pandemic.

Then, in the third chapter, Piper moves from a defense of the Bible to a defense of God (theodicy). He wants to assure us that the coronavirus need not shake our confidence that God is still righteous and good. In this chapter, Piper deals with God in his majesty, so to speak, and attempts to harmonize the abstract virtues of his holiness, righteousness, and goodness. Not only is the chapter confusing, but Piper's rational explanations do nothing to quell the dread of those who have experienced the pandemic as a great evil dished out from the hands of the almighty God. From the perspective of our actual experience, God (if there is a God) does seem to intend evil against us and desire our death. If not, then why are we all dropping dead like flies?

For those millions who have suffered pain and loss and face uncertainty at the hands of the coronavirus, hearing God's Word of promise is a matter of life and death. It is the difference between the two ways we can have God. Either God, whose wrath besieges us in events like the pandemic, without a word. Or God who comes to us and reveals himself to us a life-giving promise, a promise that awakens faith and trust in the middle of our experience of God's wrath (Hab 3:1).

Even when Piper does discuss more directly what God has done in Jesus (chapter 5), his proclamation of God's promise is far from clear. For example, Piper quotes the beautiful promise of Romans 8:32 (ESV): "He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?" But then he asks the question of what Paul meant by "all things?" His answer: "They are the things we need to do his will, glorify his name, and make it safely into his joyful presence" (47). Piper's answer sounds more like law than Gospel.

More can be said, but this is enough for readers to get an idea of the main contours of Piper's book.

Tim Saleska

GOD AND THE PANDEMIC: A Christian Reflection on the Coronavirus and its Aftermath. By N.T. Wright. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Reflective, 2020. 76 pp. Paperback. \$11.99

In *God and the Pandemic*, Anglican biblical scholar N.T. Wright sets forth his Christian response to the COVID-19 global disaster in both theoretical and practical terms. Dismayed by “knee-jerk” reactions and by pagan explanations of it that have crept into Christian thinking, including Stoicism (everything is programmed), Epicureanism (everything is random), and Platonism (a different world is our true destiny), he invites us to take a deep breath and to probe the biblical narrative.

In examining the Old Testament, Wright refuses to go down the well-worn path of prophetically viewing COVID-19 as divine punishment for certain specific human transgressions (pick the one or two you find the most repulsive in our society). “Try explaining to someone dying of coronavirus in a crowded refugee camp that all of this is because of sin,” or so he opines (10). Instead, Wright takes us to the Book of Job because it so clearly points to the “unresolved character” of much of human suffering, and he invites us to meditate on Jeremiah’s “Lamentations” as well those Psalms that invoke a similar mood. This pandemic for him is one of those moments “we are to lament, we are to complain, we are to state our case,” and as did Job, “leave it with God” (14).

The New Testament for Wright illuminates more fully what it means for us to do this. Sidestepping Luther’s two realms distinction, he contends that Jesus must be central to our understanding of what God is doing in catastrophic world events. Jesus is the one who reveals God’s redemptive disposition in that he embodies “the renewed and rescuing sovereignty of God” (24). His death and resurrection, therefore, are in fact at the heart of Wright’s preferred paradigm for interpreting all events, even those of global proportions (29). Here he also takes issue with Christians who want to sit comfortably back on their hands by stoically asserting that “God is in charge,” as well as the Platonists who pine for an early arrival of Christ’s second coming. Instead, he argues that Jesus and the apostles call upon us to help facilitate what God intends to do about COVID-19 with Jesus-shaped acts. The Sermon on the Mount, as he sees it, provides a solid description of the sort of people through whom God works for his kingdom to come on earth as in heaven (34). His translation of Romans 8:28, one that stresses St. Paul’s use of the Greek verb *synergeo*, makes it even plainer for him that “God works all things together for good” not just “for” but “with” people who love him and are called according to his purpose (48–49). In times of plague, he adds, this is what made the early Christians shine and what Luther advised. The take-away he offers us is that “God-lovers are shaped according to the pattern of the Son: the cruciform pattern in which God’s justice and mercy, his faithfulness to the covenant and to creation, are displayed before the world in tears and toil, lament and labour” (51).

Wright entitles his final chapter “Where do we go from here?” One of its more noteworthy features is his summons, on the basis of the biblical theme of “lament,” to

enter the world of pandemic pain and with prayer to grieve the numerous losses inflicted by the coronavirus. At the same time, he specifies in greater detail what it means to follow the example of Jesus and to act as “sign-producers of God’s kingdom.” Surprisingly missing, however, is any discussion of whether his list of sacrificial acts might include mask wearing and overcoming personal resistance to getting vaccinated for the sake of one’s neighbors as well as oneself. On the other hand, Wright sees both sides of the controversial issue of holding in-person worship in church sanctuaries during a pandemic, and states that Christians with differing opinions would “do well to hold one another in charitable prayer” (70). He also emphasizes the need for more robust debate over properly balancing concern for public health with sustaining local and global economies. In the realm of partisan politics, moreover, his counsel for us as Christians is to pray in hope for “wise human leadership and initiative which will, like that of Joseph in Egypt, bring about fresh and healing policies and actions across God’s wide and wounded world” (75). All in all, those of us interested in engaging in theological reflection on the COVID-19 pandemic will not be disappointed with many of the biblical insights Wright invites us to consider in this slender volume.

Jon Diefenthaler

THE POST-QUARANTINE CHURCH: Six Urgent Challenges + Opportunities That Will Determine the Future of Your Congregation by Thom S. Rainer. Carol Stream, Ill.: Tyndale Momentum, 2020. 117 pp. Hardcover. \$12.99.

In this book, Thom Rainer, a prolific commentator on twenty-first century church life, offers his “take” on the post-pandemic church in America. While he does not soft pedal the disruptive challenges that the coronavirus has heaped upon congregations and their leaders, his view of their future is a hopeful one, filled with opportunities for revitalization in our post-churched religious environment. As founder and CEO of Church Answers, he bases his prognosis upon surveys of and conversations with numerous church workers in the field.

As he has been wont to do in his other writings, Rainer provides us with a menu, in this instance of six “opportunities” the “challenges” of COVID have presented for churches of every type. Chief among these are more expansive and creative use of digital media, to which the pandemic introduced many congregations, in order to reach people far as well as near with the gospel, a more deliberate effort to connect with the local community that too many commuter congregations have tended to ignore, a remaking of the church facility emptied by lockdowns and restrictions into one that is more suited and available for “community” rather than just membership use, and the scheduling of services more often, at multiple sites, and on days other than Sunday. Here and there, Rainer sprinkles his narrative with anecdotes, such a church in Georgia that turned a portion of its facilities into a free laundromat for community residents, and during evening hours offered childcare for parents or grandparents wanting to use the laundromat (46). Many churches were already moving in this direction. But as Rainer sees it, the pandemic has made these kinds of changes more urgent than ever.

At the same time, *The Post-Quarantine Church* is not a book devoid of theological considerations. Rainer in fact sees the pandemic as a wake-up call for churches, one that God is using not only to nudge congregations into a greater dependency upon him, but to put them on the path to new life. For this reason, he calls attention to place of prayer in the early church and devotes an entire chapter to the subject of taking “prayer to a new and powerful level” (55–67).

Throughout this book, Rainer makes it clear that there is no return to “normal” for the “post-quarantine church.” While “normal” is the future that some might desire, the one into which he believes churches need to lean is far more promising. Hence, there is a six-fold outline on these pages for healthy discussions on the part of pastors with their staffs and leadership teams.

Jon Diefenthaler

Lutheran Mission Matters Call for Papers May 2022

The editorial committee of *Lutheran Mission Matters* (LMM) invites you to submit an article for the May 2022 issue on the chosen theme, “Worship and Mission.” We want you join others in trying to expand the conversation about worship as it often takes place in today’s church. Discussions and debates still often focus on how worship serves those within the congregational community. But public worship services are also key points of witness and interaction with those outside the community. So, “worship and mission” is always an appropriate theme.

Keeping in mind “worship *and* mission” means that matters of barriers, inclusion, catechesis, and assimilation are as relevant as theological foundations and liturgical customs when discussing the nature, purpose, forms, and assessments of worship. There is no Christian worship without the Gospel in Word and Sacraments. But so that the Gospel may be proclaimed clearly and heard rightly, we need not only to think with our theological norms but also in light of culture, tradition, semiotics, and aesthetics.

A wide range of questions naturally follows:

- Questions of *focus*: Who makes up the worshipping community? Who defines the “worshipping community”?
- Questions of *content*: How do we decide what and how our worship services will proclaim, teach, and pray for, especially when we know and want others to listen?
- Questions of *form*: How do we assess and adapt our worship forms in both theological and contextual terms?
- Questions of *community*: How should a congregation explain and administer Baptism and Holy Communion?
- Questions of *biblical interpretation*: How do we deal with the fact that the Old Testament prescribes much for Israel’s worship, but the New Testament hardly anything for the Church?
- Questions of *Christian unity*: How can the practices and concerns of other churches provide faithful insights into a broader spectrum of worship and its role within the wider community?
- Questions of *outreach*: How does God’s “divine service” extend beyond the public worship service in those empowered by Word and Sacrament to be the Body of Christ into the world?

You are invited to submit articles, studies, or observations about worship and mission in the life of the church. *Lutheran Mission Matters* is a peer-reviewed publication, available online at <https://www.lsfm.global> and in the Atlas (American Theological Library Association Serials) database or as printed journals. The journal

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is in its twenty-eighth year of publication.

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LMM articles are generally up to 3,000 words in length, although longer articles will be considered. The deadline of March 1, 2022 is negotiable. Articles dealing with aspects of the theology and practice of Lutheran mission other than this issue's theme will be considered for publication, space permitting. Send your ideas and questions to the editor of the journal, Dr. Victor Raj (editor@lsfm.global), with a copy to the Editorial Assistant at assistanted@lsfm.global.

Please let us know soon of your willingness to be a part of this publishing effort.

In Christ's mission to the world, and on behalf of the Editorial Committee,
Rev. Dr. Victor Raj, Editor of *Lutheran Mission Matters*

Submission Guidelines

We welcome your participation in writing for *Lutheran Mission Matters*. Please observe the following guidelines for submission of manuscripts.

Lutheran Mission Matters publishes studies of missiological issues under discussion in Christian circles across the world. Exegetical, biblical, theological, historical, and practical dimensions of the apostolic mission of the church are explored in these pages. (See the mission statement below.) While issues often focus on a theme, the editorial committee encourages and appreciates submissions of articles on any missiological topic.

Contributors can familiarize themselves with previous issues of *Missio Apostolica* and *Lutheran Mission Matters* at the Lutheran Society for Missiology's website (<https://lsfm.global>). Click on Our Journals to view PDFs of previous issues.

Book reviews: LSFM also welcomes book reviews. Submit reviews of no more than 500 words. E-mail Dr. Joel Okamoto (bookreviews@lsfm.global) if interested in writing a review.

Mission Statement

Lutheran Mission Matters serves as an international Lutheran forum for the exchange of ideas and discussion of issues related to proclaiming the Gospel of Jesus Christ globally.

Formatting and Style

Please consult and use *The Chicago Manual of Style*, 17th edition for endnotes. See basic examples below and/or consult the “Chicago-Style Citation Quick Guide” (http://www.chicagomanualofstyle.org/tools_citationguide.html).

¹ David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991), 243–255.

² Hans Küng, *Does God Exist? An Answer for Today*, trans. Edwin Quinn (New York: Doubleday, 1980), 184–186.

³ Robert J. Priest, Terry Dischinger, et al., “Researching the Short-Term Mission Movement,” *Missiology, An International Review* 34 (2006): 431–450.

References to Luther's works must identify the original document and the year of its publication. Please use the following model.

⁴ Martin Luther, *Ninety-five Theses (1517)* in *Luther's Works*, ed. Harold J. Grimm (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1957), 31:17–34.

Quotations of or allusions to specific texts in the Lutheran Confessional writings must be documented. The use of modern translations of the *Book of Concord* is encouraged. Please use the following model.

⁵ Augsburg Confession V (Concerning the Office of Preaching) in *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, ed. R. Kolb, T. J. Wengert, C. P. Arand (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 40.

Direct quotations exceeding four manuscript lines should be set off from the text in an indented paragraph, without quotation marks. Omissions in a quotation should be noted by ellipsis, with an additional period to end a sentence, as appropriate.

Spelling should follow the latest edition of *Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary*. Words in languages other than English should be italicized.

Preparation and Submission

Length: Concise, clear articles are preferred. Manuscripts should not be more than 3,000–4,000 words although longer pieces may be arranged by the editor.

Content: *Lutheran Mission Matters* is committed to addressing the academic community as well as pastors and people throughout the church and involving them in the theology and practice of mission. Use of terms or phrases in languages other than the language of the article itself is discouraged. The use of complex and long sentences is discouraged. Attention should be paid to paragraphing so that the article is easy to follow and appears inviting on the page.

Use of call-outs: *Lutheran Mission Matters* frequently uses call-outs to break up blocks of text on a page and to emphasize important points being made in the article. The author is invited to use Word's Text Highlight Color to suggest words or phrase that may be included in a call-out. The final decision will be made by the editor.

Format: Please submit articles in single spaced Times New Roman 10-point font with 0.25" paragraph indents.

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Review: The editors submit every manuscript to the editorial committee for examination and critique. Decisions are reached by consensus within the committee. Authors may expect a decision normally within three months of submission. Before publication, articles are copy edited for style and clarity, as necessary. Major alterations will be made available to the author for review.

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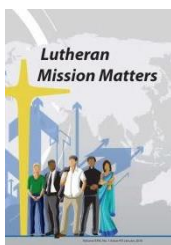
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