

# ***Lutheran Mission Matters***



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# Faithfulness Versus Unfaithfulness

## According to Matthew 25:14–30

Carlos Walter Winterle

**Abstract:** God entrusted talents to each of us, to some more, to others fewer. How are we managing these talents? A talent may be understood as money, as a skill, or as the Gospel itself. The growth of the church, under God’s blessings, depends on how we manage these talents. We depend exclusively on God’s grace for our salvation. But we cannot deny that God entrusts us with talents to be used and multiplied, and we are responsible for them. Are we “faithful” servants, or “lazy” servants?

*Faithfulness* and *unfaithfulness* are terms often related to marriage. God uses these terms several times in the Old Testament to describe the relationship between Himself and His people. He describes sometimes in very rude and realistic pictures how His people were unfaithful, running after other gods.

Maybe the Prophet Hosea is the best example, as he was asked to marry “an adulterous wife and children of unfaithfulness, because the land is guilty of the vilest adultery in departing from the LORD” (Hosea 1:2). The Prophet also wrote (4:1–2): “Hear the word of the LORD, you Israelites, because the LORD has a charge to bring against you who live in the land: ‘There is no faithfulness, no love, no acknowledgment of God in the land. There is only cursing, lying and murder, stealing and adultery; they break all bounds, and bloodshed follows bloodshed.’” Does it look familiar to you? Is it not a report of our time?

Jeremiah wrote about the unfaithfulness of Israel and Judah:

During the reign of King Josiah, the LORD said to me, “Have you seen what faithless Israel has done? She has gone up on every high hill and under every spreading tree and has committed adultery there. I thought that after



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she had done all this, she would return to me but she did not, and her unfaithful sister Judah saw it. I gave faithless Israel her certificate of divorce and sent her away because of all her adulteries. Yet I saw that her unfaithful sister Judah had no fear; she also went out and committed adultery. Because Israel's immorality mattered so little to her, she defiled the land and committed adultery with stone and wood. In spite of all this, her unfaithful sister Judah did not return to me with all her heart, but only in pretense," declares the LORD. (Jer 3:6–19)

Ezekiel 23 presents God's judgment against Oholah (Samaria) and Oholibah (Jerusalem) in a very harsh way:

They became prostitutes in Egypt, engaging in prostitution from their youth. In that land their breasts were fondled and their virgin bosoms caressed. . . . Oholah engaged in prostitution while she was still mine; and she lusted after her lovers, the Assyrians. . . . Her sister Oholibah saw this, yet in her lust and prostitution she was more depraved than her sister. . . . She carried her prostitution still further. . . . When she carried on her prostitution openly and exposed her naked body, I turned away from her in disgust, just as I had turned away from her sister. . . . Yet she became more and more promiscuous as she recalled the days of her youth, when she was a prostitute in Egypt. There she lusted after her lovers, whose genitals were like those of donkeys and whose emission was like that of horses. . . . Therefore, this is what the Sovereign LORD says: "Since you have forgotten me and turned your back on me, you must bear the consequences of your lewdness and prostitution. . . . You will suffer the penalty for your lewdness and bear the consequences of your sins of idolatry. Then you will know that I am the Sovereign LORD."

Why does God use such "pornographic" language to depict the unfaithfulness of His people? Because this was the way the neighboring countries worshiped their gods, many of them gods and goddesses of fertility. God uses something real to describe the spiritual relationship of faithfulness and unfaithfulness between Him and His people. And to show that nothing is hidden from His eyes, not even all the pornography that surrounds our Christians, taking many of them away from the church to whom they had promised faithfulness on the day of their Confirmation. It is nothing new under heaven. This is the reason why I quoted these texts. Pornography and unfaithfulness are still a stumbling block on the way of many Christians to divert them from the church and from God.

On the other hand, in spite of the unfaithfulness of His people, God is always faithful to us. "If we are faithless, he will remain faithful, for he cannot disown himself" (2 Tim 2:13). In His faithfulness, He sent His Beloved Son to die for the unfaithful, "the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God" (1 Pt 3:18). We

are not able to remain faithful, due to our human sinful nature. But God's grace covers us with the white garment of Christ's righteousness, and *He daily and fully forgives all sins to me and all believers* (Small Catechism, Third Article), renewing His love every single day. His love and His strength make us able to come back to His arms, and He accepts us back in spite of our unfaithfulness. Therefore, "I delight greatly in the LORD; my soul rejoices in my God. For he has clothed me with garments of salvation and arrayed me in a robe of his *righteousness*, as a bridegroom adorns his head like a priest, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels" (Is 61:10, emphasis added). This is the positive way God speaks about His relationship with His people, like the faithful relationship at a wedding. "Jesus, Thy blood and righteousness / My beauty are, my glorious dress; / Midst flaming worlds, in these arrayed, / With joy shall I lift up my head" (LSB 563:1).

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In this way Jesus presents Himself in Revelation as the faithful bridegroom celebrating His wedding with the church.

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Look! God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. 'He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death' or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away." He who was seated on the throne said, "I am making everything new!" Then he said, "Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true." (Rev 21:1–5)

Jesus portrays Himself as the bridegroom and the Church as His bride in the parable of the ten virgins (Mt 25:1–13), just before the parable of the talents. The same image is used in the parable of the wedding banquet (Mt 22:1–14). And Paul makes the analogy between the relationship of a man and a woman, and Christ and His Church (Eph 5:21–33) and calls it "a profound mystery."

This analogy refers to our individual relationship with God, and also to our corporate relationship with God as a church body. First Corinthians 12:12–27 is my favorite image of the Church. I understand that this relationship has a side effect

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from both sides: If the members are faithful to God in word and deeds, the church (organization) is also faithful. On the other hand, if the church is faithful to God's Word and Sacraments, the members will have no excuse to be unfaithful to God. But the reality shows a different picture. Is the unfaithfulness of our members a result of the unfaithfulness of the church? Maybe not in the same sense portrayed by God in the Old Testament; but due to the church's selfishness, not looking to the real needs and reality of the members in this twenty-first century, the church has been unfaithful to God's original plan and, as a consequence, the members have been unfaithful as well, abandoning the church, following their own desires or the promises offered by other church bodies.

The challenge proposed by our editor is: "Has the church in America, which for almost fifty years has been losing more members than it has won for Jesus, been unfaithful? Are we like the third servant in the text?"

As for me personally, I have to look to this challenge with other eyes than the majority of the writers of this issue. America doesn't mean only North America (have you ever realized that?). America means also South and Central America. And, as a South American, a Brazilian, I will try to write about the proposed challenge from a South American point of view. Of course, I will refer to the Christian Church in North America as well, as I have had several opportunities to visit Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS) congregations and interact with pastors and members, as well as with the national leadership.

The LCMS was always set as an example during my seminary time in Brazil (1962–1972) of a church body that manages well the talents she received. What a frustration it was when I began to know the LCMS from inside. Besides lots of faithfulness, I saw practices that don't match with a faithful church. "A household divided against itself will not stand" (Mt 12:25). Maybe the root of the lack of growing begins here?

I will work with the text from three different approaches:

- 1) A talent as a currency
- 2) A talent as a gift
- 3) A talent as the big treasure God handed over to His Church: The Holy Gospel

## **1. A Talent as a Currency**

One talent is equivalent to 6,000 denarii (about twenty years of labor). Depending on the exchange rate of the dollar, it may come to one talent equals 500,000 US dollars (USD). How many USD talents were sent to Brazil to establish and to maintain the church in my home country? It was a huge investment! Did the

Evangelical Lutheran Church of Brazil (IELB) manage well those talents, being faithful to what was entrusted to her?

The German immigrants brought the Lutheran Christian faith to Brazil first in 1824. It was not for a religious reason that the Germans moved to Brazil, as it happened in North America. It was an economic and political matter. Lack of land, poverty, and famine moved many German families to accept the invitation of the Brazilian government to settle in South of Brazil. It was a very poorly populated province (state) that needed to be colonized, but under the risk that the Spanish countries around it might annex it. Also, Brazil's first Emperor, Peter I, who had proclaimed the independence of Brazil in 1822, was married to Austrian Princess Leopoldina, from the House of Habsburg. She encouraged the Germans to come to Brazil.

They organized themselves in small communities, with a school, a church, and a dance hall. Very few pastors were available, and the religious degeneration was visible. But some Lutherans wanted to remain faithful to the faith of their forefathers. When they heard about the Missouri Synod, they contacted the leadership in North America, and Pastor Broders was sent to check on the possibilities in 1900. He was very frustrated with the lack of biblical knowledge and with the behavior of the so-called "Lutherans." In his report, he was not in favor of supporting the plan to send Missouri Synod pastors to Brazil. But then it happened, by God's hand, that he missed his ship back to North America. While he was waiting in the city for the next ship, some people realized that he was a Lutheran pastor, and they told him about some Lutherans living in a rural area not too far from the harbor. He decided to visit those people.

Father Gowert, the leader of that group, had dreamed the night before and saw some coins in his dream. When Pastor Broders arrived and introduced himself, Father Gowert, a faithful German-Russian Lutheran, made a "colloquy" with the pastor, based on the Small Catechism. Father Gowert was happy with Pastor Broders' witness of faith; and when he saw the coins the visitor showed him, he recognized the same coins he had seen in his dream. This was like a sign that the Missouri Synod was the true church that would send pastors to serve the Lutherans in Brazil.

Following the old paternalistic mission system, the Missouri Synod paid for almost everything necessary to establish a district of the LCMS in Brazil, investing a lot of talents. In 1903, a small seminary was established by Pastor Hartmeister; and, in 1904, *Der Brasilianische District der deutschen evangelisch-lutherischen Synode von Missouri, Ohio und andern Staaten* was established, with the presence of a LCMS representative, Rev. Louis Lochner, fourteen pastors, one teacher, and ten laypeople, representing ten congregations with around three thousand members.

The USD talents sent to Brazil were well invested, and they multiplied not only 100% as in the parable, but much more. At the very beginning, the mission was

given the German name, “*Sammelmission*,” meaning to collect German background Lutherans dispersed in southern Brazil. Many churches, when they heard about the work the Missouri pastors were doing, contacted them, asking them to come to where they were living. My grandfather had a small grocery business and a dance hall; and, along with some other leaders of that community, they went on horseback to call a Missouri Lutheran pastor to serve them. The dance hall was used as a church. The place is Moreira, where the oldest orphanage and home for the aged of the IELB are located.

Usually the congregations built their own churches and schools, some of timber, some of bricks. But they were not able to afford the salary of the pastors. The Missouri Synod was paying the salary of most of the pastors sent to Brazil, and also of the professors of Concordia Seminary, the school fees of the candidates, the trips, etc. Some pastors got their income from the parish school, charging school fees, as they were teachers and pastors at the same time, serving many congregations in one parish. Some members used to give to the pastor part of their crops, and the pastor’s family had some land to cultivate and to keep pigs, chickens, and sometimes a milk cow. This was the situation of my father when he graduated from the seminary, first as a teacher in 1929, and after that as a pastor in 1944.

The USD talents did not stop growing and generated plenty of interest. After the first stage of *Sammelmission* among the German immigrants, the church decided to begin a mission among Portuguese-speaking people in 1918. Pastor Rudolph Hasse, my wife’s grandfather, was born in Brazil, had married a Portuguese woman, and was fluent in Portuguese. He was chosen to begin this mission. The local population all had a Roman Catholic background, and it was not an easy mission. The Lutheran school opened many doors to evangelism. The teacher and pastor, Octacílio Schuler, worked together with Pastor Hasse. He married the daughter of the local pharmacist, a woman with a Portuguese background. The Evangelical Lutheran Church of Brazil celebrated the centennial of the first Portuguese-speaking congregation last year in 2018.

Pastor R. Hasse was later sent as missionary to the former capital of the country, Rio de Janeiro. From there he began the mission in several cities in the northeast and in the north of the country; and he also crossed the Atlantic Ocean and began the mission in Portugal. The Evangelical Lutheran Church of Brazil has congregations and mission stations in all twenty-six states that

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And what about the USD talents? Due to the paternalist mission system adopted by the LCMS, the IELB was dependent on the USD for one hundred years. Only in 2000, after a strict ten-year independence plan, and a huge effort in teaching stewardship to the congregations, did the IELB become financially independent from the LCMS. The church in Brazil had shown faithfulness in managing the USD talents she had received from the LCMS, and the talents were multiplied uncountable times.

Many congregations had become independent during the twentieth century. But it took a while for some to begin to dig out their own talent to invest in mission around them and in other places. The paternalist mentality was still strong. One of the seminary professors used to say, “Don’t speak about money to your members. The Missouri Synod provides. . . .”

Slowly, some larger congregations began to support smaller congregations and mission stations. The challenge was to support the seminary and the synod’s headquarters. But, by God’s grace, and by the good administration of the talents collected in Brazil, the IELB is a financially self-supported synod, managing well the talents received from the congregations.

Since 2010, the IELB has crossed the Atlantic Ocean again, this time reaching the Indian Ocean and supporting the theological education of the recently founded Lutheran Church in Mozambique. The mission began in 2006 and was officially accredited by the government in 2018. The church has seven ordained pastors, sixty candidates in training to become pastors, around eighty congregations and preaching points, and about eight thousand members.

The talents (\$) entrusted by God to the IELB have multiplied, and even if we were able to do everything that is expected from us, we have to confess as Jesus told us: “So you also, when you have done everything you were told to do, should say, ‘We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty’” (Lk 17:10). But, by God’s grace and mercy, I hope that the IELB will be able to give back at least another “five talents.”

## **An Analysis of the Administration of the USD Talents by the LCMS and by the IELB**

The IELB managed to centralize the financial administration. The congregations send 10% or more of their budget to the headquarters. Many individuals have adopted a mission project like that of Mozambique, and they send their donation to the IELB headquarters. The Brazilian LWML and the LLL support the seminary via the headquarters. The synod administration is entrusted with these talents and it manages the talents entrusted to her faithfully. This causes a growth in trust between

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the donors and the synod’s headquarters, who regularly present a financial report to the congregations. The mission opportunities and the social needs are growing, and it is difficult to attend all requests. Many districts and congregations support also local mission and social projects besides their contribution to the Synod.

The LCMS works in a different system. Every missionary, the seminaries, the mission agencies, the Recognized Service Organizations (RSOs), several foreign churches/organizations, and so on, all do their own fundraising among congregations and individuals, visiting them, giving reports, and asking for support. What happens is that many are “milking the same cow,” and some cows are becoming tired. LCMS Mission Advancement manages several projects, but, as far as I know, it is not aware of all the ongoing projects inside and outside of the USA. Having served in Africa now for thirteen years, I experience many mission teams coming to churches and to social agencies, and sponsoring even non-Lutheran churches and entities or Lutheran churches who receive support from LWF or from other entities as well. This movement doesn’t have a central coordination. I am not sure if this is the best way to manage the USD talents entrusted to LCMS members and congregations. While some who “cry” more receive more, others are struggling to survive because they don’t have the contacts and access some have.

“From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked” (Lk 12:48).

See below the diagram showing the growth of the IELB from her beginning up to 2017.

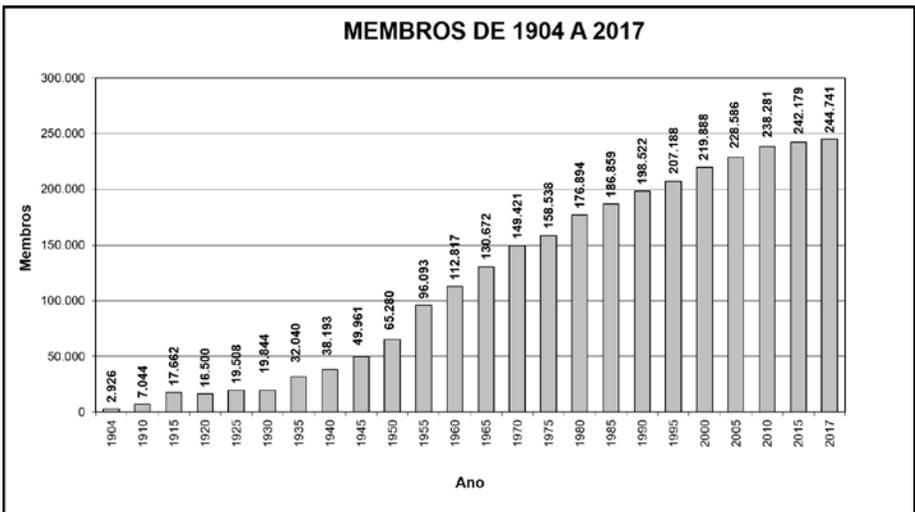


Figure 1. Courtesy of the IELB Central Office.

## 2. A Talent as an Individual Gift

Every one of us is a gifted/talented person. Some are more gifted than others, but this does not diminish anyone. We do not deserve God's talents, but He entrusts each of us according to His love and wisdom.

When it comes to a talent as a gift, I like the text of Romans 12:4–8:

For just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others. We have different gifts, according to the grace given to each of us. If your gift is prophesying, then prophesy in accordance with your faith; if it is serving, then serve; if it is teaching, then teach; if it is to encourage, then give encouragement; if it is giving, then give generously; if it is to lead, do it diligently; if it is to show mercy, do it cheerfully.

“We have different gifts, according to the *grace* given to each of us.” With how many of the above-mentioned gifts do you identify yourself the most? Are you working with them in a manner to multiply them? Are you faithful to the gifts entrusted to you?

I still envy some talents entrusted to others. This is the natural reaction of my Old Adam. Why do some receive five talents, others two, and the other only one? I will never have the answer this side of heaven.

On the other hand, God gave me the talent to acknowledge the gifts I do not have and to work as a team, joining the gifts of others to do God's work. The background of the gifts mentioned above is that we are Christ's body, members of one another. As in 1 Corinthians 12:12ff., the apostle Paul appeals to our own experience as we observe how the members of our body work harmoniously. This is for me the best image of the church. If the members do not work harmoniously for the good of the body, something is very wrong and we are sick.

Returning to our churches in America: How many gifts has God entrusted to our members? If everyone is faithful with the gift he receives, working in harmony with the gifts of others, the church/body of Christ, will be strong and healthy! If not, the church becomes weak and stops growing. Are we an old church that is running fast to the grave? No! God, by His grace, renews the members of His body daily, bringing new members to His fellowship and also giving them talents.

Maybe we are selfish, or jealous of the new members who are brought into Christ's body? Sometimes we think we are self-sufficient and that we do not need our fellow Christians. This often has to do with politics in the church.

We know that Jesus' kingdom is not of this earth (Jn 18:36). We know what Jesus said to His disciples when they were struggling about “who is the greatest.” Jesus said: “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high

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officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave— just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mt 20:25–28).

Even so, the churches copy the model of the politicians. “I am the boss!” is the rule in many church bodies and also in congregations. Instead of serving, some want to rule. Instead of cooperating with one another, some cause divisions. “If a house is divided against itself, that house cannot stand” (Mk 3:25). Instead of humility, arrogance and pride characterize many church leaders. Power and riches are the goal of many bishops and pastors.

How can the talents be multiplied if we use them in a selfish way?

Comparing the Lutheran churches in Brazil and in the USA, the IELB does not have a label on the head of each pastor, saying: “liberal” or “conservative.” Of course, we have big differences among us, and the gifts are various. Of course, we have problems, and the church on earth will never be perfect. But the IELB is united in one doctrine, faithful to the Bible and to the Lutheran Confessions. The leadership is elected as a natural development of the leaders detected by the church, without politics or opposition parties. This is the reality for the last couple of years. The church body’s history shows that there was much political activity in the past that caused many problems for the church body. But thanks be to God, the elections at least for the last twenty-five years have run smooth and quiet.

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For the unity of the church, a daily devotional book is edited every year. Eighty thousand copies are sold and distributed. Also, the Lutheran Hour Ministry, which works in perfect agreement with the church body’s central administration and the Brazilian CPH, has a daily devotional book. Home Bible studies have their national yearly plan, as do the Sunday School, the LWML, and the LLL. The pastors receive guidelines for the sermons, and sermons are prepared for reading services when the pastor is not available. The auxiliary organizations have seats at the annual meeting of the Board of Directors, and they present their reports and plans. The gifts of each leader are acknowledged and respected, with a good balance between clergy and laypeople (men and women). Strong personalities cause reactions, but with a healthy debate for the sake of a healthy church body.

Evangelism and social work are always on the table. The IELB has as a general watchword: CRISTO PARA TODOS = CHRIST FOR ALL; and each year some aspect of this mission-minded watchword is highlighted in a national plan as

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reported above. A banner and specific study guides about the watchword are shared with all every year.

### **3. A Talent as the Big Treasure God Handed over to His Church: The Holy Gospel**

Luther wrote: “The true treasure of the church is the Holy gospel of the glory and the grace of God” (Thesis #62 of Luther’s 95 Theses).<sup>1</sup>

God entrusted the Gospel to the church. It is much more than five, two, or only one talent. As the Gospel is Jesus Himself (Jn 1:1, 14), there is no way to measure His cost and value.

How is the church managing this large number of talents? Even the tomb could not retain Jesus. Shall the church retain Jesus only for herself? This is what the third servant did. He saved in a very secure place, according to his point of view, the talent that he had received from his master. He was afraid of the master, afraid to lose what he had received; he was jealous that something could happen with the gift. And we know the end of the story.

The Gospel was brought to the “marketplace” in different ways to be invested and to be multiplied. It began with a verbal message, shared mouth to mouth by the believers. And the church grew amazingly the first decades (Acts 2:47). Crossing the Jews’ border, the apostle Paul went to almost all known countries of his time, preaching the Gospel and presenting it to all in written form. The Evangelists and others wrote the New Testament on scrolls and parchments (2 Tim 4:13). After a while, the same Gospel was presented in books with pages, similar to what we have now. The printing press was invented, and the same Gospel became more accessible through Luther’s translation. We now have the Gospel in several versions, editions, and translations, from very simple and popular editions to luxury and expensive ones. And now, we are living in the era of digital technology. I was shocked the first time I saw a pastor reading the sermon text from his cell phone. No Bible in his hand? But the Gospel was the same as I learned it as a child.

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This brief excursion through the history of the Bible allows me to say that the Gospel can never be changed! As St. Paul wrote in Galatians 1:8: “But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned.” But the Gospel may be “wrapped” and presented in different ways: the classic black-bound Bible, the many colorful ones, electronic versions, and translated into as many languages as possible, and so on.

The same may be said about our Divine Services. Our Order of Service has a strong tradition and presents the Gospel in a very clear way. As one of my colleagues once said: “If it were not for the liturgy and the hymns, I would have nothing from the last service I attended, because I could not understand the sermon.” But this does not mean that the Order of Service must be followed with the same tunes or words as in the sixteenth century. The *Lutheran Service Book* itself has five different options. Pastors are using Power Point presentations to illustrate the Gospel with pictures. Sign language has become more and more common in many services. The black robe gave way to a white one, with colorful stoles. Music has been played by several instruments, and not only by the organ.

Does this change the Gospel? I understand that churches who are doing these and other changes in the Order of Service are going out and learning from the “marketplace” how to invest the Gospel in a way that it will produce double and much more. Maybe some are running a big risk, going too far? But at least they are not hiding the talent in the ground, closed inside the four walls of a church building or in some theological books, scared that the talent may be contaminated by the world. The Gospel was given by God to be invested!

And when the Landlord comes back and asks what we did with His talent,—yes, it is still His talent, not ours!—what will we say? *Here you have it, Lord. I preserved it from being rotted or contaminated. I wrote several books defending it and preserving it in its purity. But . . . nothing else happened. I don't have anything else to give you back.*

Too bad for those who do not take the risk to invest the Gospel in the “marketplace.” They will never see any profit.

A colleague and good friend of mine came to my office after finishing his PhD, while I was president of the Lutheran Church in Brazil. He proposed that the church should have a kind of laboratory of theology, where the scholars could study and do research without having to give classes or to preach. It was theology for itself. He compared his proposal to a chemical laboratory where scientists were doing experiments and maybe they would discover some new element. I replied to him: Theology does not exist without people. Jesus did not entrust the Gospel to the church to be examined and dissected, but to be read and proclaimed to all for the salvation of many.

Maybe some are running  
a big risk, going too far?  
But at least they are  
not hiding the talent  
in the ground,  
closed inside the four  
walls of a church building  
or in some theological  
books, scared that  
the talent may be  
contaminated  
by the world.  
The Gospel was given by  
God to be invested!

This takes me back to the question proposed by the editor: *Why is the Lutheran Church in (North) America not growing in the last fifty years?* Does it have to do with a dead orthodoxy again?

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in Brazil never stopped growing. Look at the diagram again. And the time it grew more was just during and after World War II, when the German language was prohibited in the country and the church had to go out from her “German ghettos” and face the Brazilian reality. The talent had to be dug out from the ground where it was hidden and brought to the “marketplace” to produce interest. And it worked! Also, when the USD talents stopped coming, the church reacted in an amazing way and opened her eyes wider to the ripe fields around her and in other countries. Could it be better? Of course! As long as the Landlord is not back, it is our duty and privilege to work with the talents entrusted to us. Much more can be done to reach the unreached and the unchurched with the Gospel. “The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance” (2 Pt 3:9).

Jesus did not entrust the Gospel to the church to be examined and dissected, but to be read and proclaimed to all for the salvation of many.

## Conclusion

It is a well-known joke: What should be done to get rid of the bats in the church’s tower? Confirm them, and they will never more appear in the church again.

Thinking about the reasons why so many confirmed youths abandon the church, I have a theory. Going back to the beginning of this paper, I mentioned the unfaithfulness of God’s people in the Old Testament due to the pagan sex rituals as part of their worship of fertility. When our youths begin to experience sex before marriage, their consciences accuse them and they do not feel comfortable coming to the Service. Having to choose between a pure and godly life according to God’s Commandments and a life of pleasure, especially when they experience the freedom of living independently far from home—they choose the false freedom. Drunkenness and drugs help them to go farther and farther away from the church. Am I right in my theory? I am not sure, but lots of evidences and experiences in the ministry show that this is a possibility.

Divorce is also a reason for young couples to leave the church. I become frustrated when I look back to my forty-six years of ministry and I see so many former faithful youths and young couples now far from the two congregations I served in Brazil for fifteen and twenty years, respectively. Many of the weddings I

performed ended in divorce, in spite of talking about this to exhaustion before the wedding and after it.

On the other hand, God's promise is still valid: "Start children off on the way they should go, and even when they are old they will not turn from it" (Prov 22:6). Many of my former youth who were far from the church at certain points in their lives came back and confessed again their faith in the gracious God, who reveals Himself in Jesus. Hope never ends.

God entrusted many talents to our Confessional Lutheran churches: money, skills and, over all, the Gospel. Let us not hide them, but bring them to the "marketplace" and invest them to double, triple, or more. The churches of the International Lutheran Council have the blessing to preserve the pure Gospel, not being contaminated by the so-called "Other Gospels" (Galatians 1). Let us share it in a loud and clear voice by words and deeds, not isolating ourselves as in a monastery, or just pointing our finger to what is wrong, but rather pointing our finger to show the Way.

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Faithfulness to the Holy Scripture and to the Lutheran Confessions does not mean living in a monastery, but it means going out into the world to invest what God entrusted us!

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Kurt Aland, ed. *Martin Luther's 95 Theses* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1965), 56.