



2011 BISHOP'S SERIES:
THE NEXT GENERATION



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NORTHWESTERN MINNESOTA SYNOD

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January: A Vision for Our Synod

During the remainder of my term as synodical bishop, I propose that we embrace the following purpose statement:

The purpose of the Northwestern Minnesota Synod, in this time and place, is to serve God's mission by focusing its entire life on calling forth, raising up, forming in faith and spiritual leadership, and sending **the next generations of disciples** of our Lord Jesus Christ.

This purpose statement recognizes some of the *historic strengths of our synod*:

- a deep care for **teaching the faith** to the baptized through Sunday Schools and VBS ministries in our congregations,
- a strong tradition of **synod youth gatherings**,
- a commitment to **campus ministries** and **outdoor ministries**, and
- a long-time role in receiving the gifts of young leaders serving in their **first calls in rostered ministry** "on our turf."

This purpose statement also takes note of **concerns, hopes and dreams** that many of us share in this time and place:

- Will our children and grandchildren have faith?
- How can we best welcome newcomers to our area, including immigrant populations?
- Do our congregations and our synod have an earthly future to look forward to?
- How can we stir up vision and passion among our disciples who want to "get on with it" (God's mission)? As a member of our synod staff has helpfully noted, "getting on with it" involves "going out with it."

With this purpose statement in mind, we will evaluate every opportunity that comes our way by asking: **How will this idea, ministry or program serve our purpose of making disciples of all**

our children?¹ Using this purpose statement as a lens, we will sharpen our focus—embracing some possibilities, holding off on other possibilities.

Signature Ministries and Initiatives

This purpose statement leads us, for the next three years, to give priority to the following signature ministries:

- **Developing a dynamic partnership** with Vibrant Faith Ministries (VFM) to equip homes and families to live more deeply into their role as primary nurturers of faith in the next generation
- Continuing to gather large numbers of our middle school and senior high youth for **faith-stretching gatherings** and retreats
- **Renewing our commitment** (including our commitments of people and dollars) to Lutheran Campus Ministry of Minnesota, especially at our state universities in Bemidji and Moorhead, and our two Bible camp corporations, Luther Crest and Pathways
- Making our synod a **“desirable destination” for first-call candidates** for rostered ministries through significantly increased support for seminary scholarships, the Sustaining Rural Ministry fund, and the Fabric of Mutual Ministry partnership
- “Bending” our efforts in **developing new and renewed ministries** toward the question of how they will form the next generation of disciples in their midst
- Having a major focus on faith formation and “discipleship to share.” **Focusing on “faith practices,”** we will have a twofold line of sight: cultivating faith practices for ourselves—but also considering how we share faith formation/faith practices with others, as well.

¹ We understand “all our children” in the broadest possible ways, to include the children who are already part of our congregations, all the children who live in the 21 counties of our synod, all the children who have connections to our synod (grandchildren of people in our synod, children in the Andhra Evangelical Lutheran Church, etc.)

February: The Great Omission

Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

Deuteronomy 6:6-9

The Ten Commandments: As the head of the family should teach them in a simple way to his household...

from the Small Catechism by Dr. Martin Luther

In the last parish I served, following the service of Affirmation of Baptism one year, I received a thank-you card from one of our confirmands. Scott (not his real name) wrote in that pained scrawl of a 9th grade boy:

*“Pastor Larry, thank you for teaching me everything I know about God and the church.
Love, Scott.”*

Scott’s plain-spoken, heartfelt sentiment warmed my heart—for about 30 seconds. Then his words started to work on me, and I became troubled. Why? Because if Scott meant what he said—that I (his pastor, in weekly confirmation classes) had taught him “everything [he knew] about God and the church,” that would never be enough! One hour a week for 2+ years was a drop in the bucket, compared to the other 167 hours in Scott’s week.

I keep this thank-you note in my office still, as a reminder about one of the mightiest challenges facing the 21st century church of Jesus Christ. It is the challenge of moving beyond the “great omission” in the life of God’s people.

Great Omission?

We know what the Great Commission is, as Jesus himself articulated it in the 28th chapter of St. Matthew’s gospel:

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, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.

Matthew 28:18-20

Indeed, the Great Commission has been and still remains our “marching orders” from the Risen Christ.

But what is the “Great Omission?” The phrase has been coined by Dr. David W. Anderson of Vibrant Faith Ministries to describe something that happened in churches across North America during the last century: **“the neglect of the role of the home in making disciples.** The omission of the home as a vital partner with the public congregational life has hampered attempts to revive the outreach focus of the church in recent decades.” (*From the Great Omission to Vibrant Faith: The Role of the Home in Renewing the Church*, p. 19)

To be sure, not all congregations have neglected the role of the family in faith formation—and not all families or homes have abdicated this crucial responsibility. But on the whole, our churches have mirrored the wider culture in de-valuing the formative role of the home in the development of mature healthy human beings who follow Jesus Christ. And oddly enough, some of the best things the church has done (Sunday School, confirmation classes, VBS, etc.) have contributed to this reality. How?

Dr. Anderson observes: “Twentieth-century America replaced an inherent value of family life with the value of institutional life. ... Twentieth century America became an ‘expert-ridden system.’ In an expert-ridden system, one has little to say unless that person is the expert. Since parents are not seen as experts, they might think that they have little to say, even about their own children.” (p. 56)

In the church we developed institutionalized programs of Christian education that mirrored the institutionalization of education in the wider culture. Our motto became “Get those kids to church and Sunday School!” The implication was that parents’ main role was to bring their children to the church building where competent Christian education would be delivered by experts. In so doing, however, we unwittingly disempowered parents as the primary 24/7 faith nurturers of their children. (Scott’s thank-you note to me reflects this reality.)

Not in a Vacuum

The Great Omission, as it developed in the life of the 20th century church, did not happen in a vacuum. Church realities largely reflected cultural realities. Without necessarily intending to do so, we devalued the role of moms, dads and other caring adults in homes and households.

One way this happened was in the constant references to the “dysfunctionality” of families. To be sure, many families in North America are dysfunctional to one degree or another. “Dysfunction is a rather difficult charge to address, because we all have it. It is called sin, brokenness, imperfection, and so on,” observes Dr. Anderson (p. 57). What those who decry “dysfunctional families” all too often ignore, however, is that “God can work in and through dysfunction just as Jesus worked through prejudice, refecton, torture, and death...” (p. 24)

Other factors have fed the Great Omission in the 20th century church:

- Over-attention to the stresses and strains on home life;
- Changing definitions of what constitutes a home or family in North America;
- “Family values” getting tossed about in the “culture wars” between Red State and Blue State folks;
- Misinterpretation of a small number of biblical texts that seem to portray Jesus as besmirching the role of the home in cultivating discipleship (Dr. Anderson deals effectively with these biblical passages on pp. 60-68).

Moving Beyond the Great Omission

Fortunately a growing number of congregations (including many in our synod) are recognizing and repenting of the Great Omission. And then what follows? The point is not to criticize the institutional church and its programs for Christian formation. This is not about abolishing Sunday School and all those other wonderful delivery systems!

Rather, moving beyond the Great Omission involves “bending” and reshaping all that we do in our approaches to Christian education so that we re-empower homes to be the “hot-houses” for germinating vital faith in all the baptized. Indeed, this involves recognizing, in Dr. Anderson’s wonderful formulation that “faith is formed by the power of the Holy Spirit through

personal, trusted relationships—often in our own homes....**Where Christ is present in faith, the home is church too.**" (p. 17).

As we do so, we will discover that this "new" approach is actually very, very *old*. It is at least as old as Moses' sermon to the children of Israel which we know as the Book of Deuteronomy (see Deut. 6:6-9 at the top of this column). It is at least as time-honored as Martin Luther's firm intention to write a catechism that would equip *heads of households* to teach the faith to all who live under their roof!

Next month I will write about what I believe is God's preferred future for our congregations: embracing in our common life what Dr. David Anderson calls the "Vibrant Faith Frame." Specifically, what are the locations, principles, keys and characteristics of a church re-committed to equipping homes to nurture vibrant faith? Stay tuned!

For reflection and discussion:

1. How has your faith been nurtured within your home?
2. What signs of the Great Omission do you perceive in your own life and in your congregation?
3. In addition to the factors mentioned above, what are some other reasons why homes and families have been de-valued in our culture and our churches?
4. What are some ways your congregation already is equipping parents and other caring adults to pass on the faith to the next generation of disciples?

March: Deep Into the Marrow

I am reminded of your sincere faith, a faith that dwelt first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice and now, I am sure, dwells in you.

St. Paul to St. Timothy (II Timothy 1:5)

Last month's column in this series focused on the neglect of the role of the home in making disciples. Dr. David W. Anderson calls this "The Great Omission" in the life of the North American church over the last century.

In response to this situation, Anderson and his colleagues at The Youth and Family Institute (now better known as Vibrant Faith Ministries) have birthed a vision for the 21st century church that they call the Vibrant Faith Frame. It's a perspective—indeed, a whole "vocabulary"—for describing the church's DNA, "basic stuff for the life of the church that goes deep into the marrow of its very being." (All quotations in this column are from Chapter Two in *From the Great Omission to Vibrant Faith*.)

Six Locations of Ministry

Let's face it: American Christianity has all too often reflected the individualism of American culture. The ministry of the church has focused inordinately on one's personal (read "private") relationship with Jesus. Such an approach forgets that "to be the church and pass on faith in Christ requires attention to all that God does and all that God calls Christians to be in the world."

The Vibrant Faith Frame broadens our horizons by asking us to consider at least six "locations" of ministry:

- **Children and youth:** In contrast to our tendency to place kids on the periphery, the Vibrant Faith Frame views "children and youth...[as] central to the life of the church."
- **Homes,** in which persons live "in close connection to one another in family-type relationships that offer foundational care for people."
- **Congregations,** which "represent the larger network of relationships that connect Christians" to one another.
- **Community,** the social environment in which Christians have "their most direct experience of faith made active in love that serves [the] neighbor."

- **Culture**, a community of communities in which language shapes meaning and interprets human experience.
- **Creation:** Christians live “as stewards of God’s handiwork...serving all that God creates, redeems and sustains.”

One might envision these six locations as concentric circles that ripple outwards—like a stone tossed into a pond. Shot through these “six locations of ministry” is an emphasis on the highly relational nature of Christian faith and life.

Five Principles of a Vibrant Church

If the Six Locations describe the context for ministry that responds to all that God has created and redeemed, the following Five Principles reveal the unique heart of the Vibrant Faith Frame:

1. Faith is formed by the power of the Holy Spirit through personal, trusted relationships—often in our own homes.

A simple way to understand this pivotal principle is to ask a group of Christians to do some history-sharing around the question: “Who or what has influenced your life of faith?” As staff members from Vibrant Faith Ministries have posed this question in a variety of settings they have discovered consistently that folks name those with whom they are in primary life relationships: parents, grandparents, siblings, children, godparents, etc. To be sure, pastors and church staff members are also mentioned on such lists—though usually not so much because of the positions they held as because of the relationships they had with the individual who is naming them. This reality of faith being formed through relationships is borne out, again and again, by research in the sociology of religious formation.

2. The church is a living partnership between the ministry of the congregation and ministry of the home.

Consider an analogy that compares a congregation and a grocery store. Both are places where people receive food for life. But congregations and grocery stores are “secondary social systems.” You can munch on some food while in the grocery store (as long as you remember to still pay for it at the checkout counter!)—but mainly you acquire food there, in order to eat it throughout the week somewhere else, usually in the home. So also, the “food” we receive in our congregations—God’s Word and Sacraments—is intended to be “taken home” and “eaten” on a daily basis. (Don’t we say that, teach that and believe that?) Quite literally, we do not—and we ought not—eat once a week at church and then starve ourselves the other six days until we can eat again at the next weekly

worship service. This second principle envisions a “dynamic relationship between the activities of the congregation and the activities of the homes that are engaged in the congregation.”

3. Where Christ is present in faith, home is church, too.

This third principle carries the first two principles to their logical conclusion: the home can be thought of as “the domestic church,” a “critical arena for faith formation.” This is why, for example, Martin Luther assumed that his catechism would be taught primarily by heads of households—and why these domestic “priests and pastors” were enjoined by Luther to lead daily worship (devotions) in their homes, at the beginning and ending of each day and around every meal-time. This principle also recognizes how homes are often the doorway to Christian faith and life, because “sometimes the best way to get people into the congregational church is first through the home church.”

4. Faith is caught more than it is taught.

Please read this principle carefully. It does not say that faith isn’t taught—faith is most assuredly taught! But what is taught (in a confirmation classroom, for example) “lives” or takes on flesh-and-bone only as it is also “caught” from other Christians, in daily life. This is why faith-mentors are so critical.

5. If we want Christian children and youth, we need Christian adults.

I have grown weary of hearing congregational leaders moan over “the loss of our youth.” I am, frankly, tired of hearing about how “our kids leave church as soon as they are confirmed.” Such laments take aim, in my judgment, at the wrong cohort in our communities. If you are so concerned about our children, where are the adults in their lives? This fifth principle of a vibrant church “ups the ante” for all the adults in our churches, adding what the Vibrant Faith Ministries folks call a “cross+generational focus.” This principle challenges us to see that “all Christian adults are Christian parents, thereby making a difference in the lives of children whether or not the adults are the parents of the children....[A]ll children are our children. In recent years, it has been suggested that each child should have three to five to seven adults who do not live with that child in the home and yet invest in the child’s life in healthy, supportive and faithful ways.”

The Four Keys

OK, so you’re starting to catch the vision, right? So, how do we live into this vision? The Four Keys are offered as “embedded practices” that form and nurture Christian faith in the fabric of daily life, often in the homes that make up our congregations.

Over twenty years ago the Search Institute of Minneapolis (a social research organization that helped give birth to Vibrant Faith Ministries) discovered that faithfulness in youth and adults tended to result from things like “the frequency with which an adolescent talked with mother and father about faith, the frequency of family devotions, and the frequency with which parents and children together were involved in efforts, formal or informal, to help other people.”

Out of this basic research arose the notion of the Four Keys in which all members of a Christian household can participate:

- **Caring Conversations:** opportunities every day, often around meals, for family members to share their joys and struggles, their laughter and their tears.
- **Devotions:** moments of praise and prayer in the midst of daily life—upon rising, as bread is broken, before going to bed, etc.
- **Rituals and Traditions:** practicing forgiveness, offering blessings, observing milestones in the Christian life, adorning one’s home in ways that honor God.
- **Service:** moving out into God’s world, for the sake of our neighbors, “being part of a community.”

The Four Keys, we must emphasize, are not a replacement for congregational life. Rather, they are ways that congregational life “spills over” into daily life, in households where Christians live out much of their Monday-through-Saturday lives. Congregations, indeed, can be places that also practice the Four Keys—and that furnish Four Keys resources and ideas for use in the home, where Christian people actually live out many of the other 167 hours of each week.

AAA Christian Disciples

No, this is not an advertisement for the American Automobile Association! The upshot —the outcome— of shaping or reshaping our discipleship around the locations, principles and keys of the Vibrant Faith Frame is the birthing and nurturing of Jesus-followers who are **authentic, available and affirming**.

- **Authentic** disciples are not perfect disciples, but they are honest and “real”—“free to serve, free to believe and trust God, free to live, free to love and free to fail at it all.”
- **Available** disciples seek “to be present and aware of others and creation...available to be [tools] of God’s work and will for the world.”

- **Affirming** disciples, in the midst of sin, death and evil are disciples who believe “that God’s word gets the last word, and it is a word of hope.”

Whetting the Appetite

This column has been written to whet your appetite for more—to offer some hors d’oeuvres that will leave you hungry for the full meal. If you and your congregation are ready to dive deeper into the Vibrant Faith Frame perspective I invite you to do five things:

- Visit the Vibrant Faith website at www.vibrantfaith.org;
- Read—or, better yet, read and discuss with others—a book like David Anderson’s *From the Great Omission to Vibrant Faith: The Role of the Home in Renewing the Church* (2009, The Youth and Family Institute);
- Pray about and talk with others about ways you, your home and your church might live more deeply into this vision of partnership between homes and churches;
- Take a team of disciples from your church to the next Vibrant Faith Ministries conference or other VFM event in our region.
- Watch future issues of Northern Lights for information about such learning events.

God bless you, your home and your congregation.

For reflection and discussion:

- How and why have congregations sometimes placed children or youth on the periphery of the church?
- Who or what influenced your life of faith?
- How is your church already living out the Vibrant Faith Frame (please be specific)?
- How might your church pass on the Four Keys to the homes of your parish?
- How ready is your congregation to embrace more fully the Vibrant Faith Frame?

April: They're ALL Our Children

[Jesus said], 'Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.' And he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them.

Mark 10:14-16

When it comes to words, the smallest ones are often the most important—prepositions and pronouns especially. In the Next Generation vision it's critical that we define "our" very carefully. Just who, exactly are "our" children?

Let's resist our natural tendency to narrow the definition of "our." "Our" children must be more than the kids in "our" homes or "our" congregations. What if we considered all members of the next generation with whom we have any relationship whatsoever "our" children? What if we accepted radical responsibility for all of these children? What if we drew the circle as big as we might imagine it to be?

Starting with the Inner Circle

To talk this way is not to deny our responsibility for the children in our innermost circles of kinship and relationship. Surely we will think of the children we have birthed or adopted as "our" children. When a child comes into our lives the whole world changes for us. As followers of Jesus we will avoid spiritual child abuse or neglect; we will assume a profound responsibility to "help [our] children grow in the Christian faith and life." ("Holy Baptism," Evangelical Lutheran Worship, p. 228)

But such "inner circle" responsibility cannot be borne alone by parents. For good reason the entire Christian community faces the baptismal font, everyone promising "to support [the baptized ones] and pray for them in their new life in Christ." (ELW, p. 228) In Holy Baptism, all children—whether they are carried to the font or walk on their own two feet—become God's children and "our" children. Several years ago, during a presidential election, folks asked: "Which does it take to raise a child—a family or a village?" What a silly question! It takes both a family and a village (or congregation) to raise a child in Christian faith and life. **They're all our children!**

This has profound implications for our priorities. The older generation has always borne a special responsibility for the next generation. We undertake sacrifices, commit resources, and make huge investments in all our children. We do this together, cognizant of the fact that all Christian adults are also Christian parents. Our care for the children in our homes and churches is foundational for all the ways we tend the other children whom God entrusts to us.

And for how long do we bear such radical responsibility for all our children? When do Christian parents get to “retire?” Several years ago, on a Confirmation Sunday, I did something rather mean. I preached my sermon primarily to the parents of the confirmands. Recalling the promises they made when their kids were baptized, I asked them when they would be finished fulfilling those promises? (I’m guessing most of them thought they were finished that day—it was Confirmation Sunday, after all!)

Here’s the mean thing I did. I quoted the words from the liturgy of Baptism in the *Lutheran Book of Worship*, including these words:

As they grow in years, you should...provide for their instruction in the Christian faith, that, living in the covenant of their Baptism and in communion with the Church, they may lead godly lives **until the day of Jesus Christ.**

There’s the end date for our Christian parenting: when Jesus returns to usher in God’s New Creation. We’re not finished with our responsibilities to the next generation until then! Even if you have adult children, your calling to help form Jesus Christ in them (Galatians 4:19) is not finished until the Day of Resurrection.

The Next Generation in Our Communities

But is it enough for us to look after all our children in the inner circles of our homes and congregations? What about all the other kids in our “mission field?” Are they not, also in some sense, “our” children?

A pastor who used to serve in our synod loved to walk her dog through the small town where she served—attracting children who loved to pet the dog. The pastor’s dog helped open up ways to express love and care for all the children of her town.

Aren't we always stumbling across such opportunities in our callings to be salt and light (Matthew 5:13-14) in our communities? The next generation all around us—in our communities—they are also “our” children. **And we tend to under-estimate how many of them are out there.**

Questions:

- In the 21 counties that make up our synod, who do we have more of—children and youth under the age of 18, or senior adults age 65 and older?
- Which of these cohorts in our region’s population is larger?

When I have posed this question in congregations up and down western Minnesota, almost always I have heard this answer: “Oh goodness, we have lots more old folks than youth in our community!” And almost always this answer is dead wrong! Here’s what we discover in the latest demographic data regarding the territory covered by our synod:

Age Category	Numbers of Persons	Percentage of Persons
Under Age 18	93,566	23.5%
Age 65+	67,603	17%

Nearly one-quarter of the almost 400,000 residents of our synod’s 21 counties are under the age of 18. This holds true in 17 of the 21 counties of the synod.²

Truly, the next generation is all around us! And they are, in a sense, all “our” children: children to treasure, know by name, pray for, and invite into the Christian life.

What if our synod became known as “the church that cares passionately for all God’s children?” What if we bent over backwards to invite the children, youth and their families to all the good things God is doing in our congregations?

What if, when issues of public policy were being discussed, we Lutherans became identified as those who consistently stand on the side of what’s best for the next generation? Part of our callings

² U.S. Census Bureau data available at factfinder.census.gov (accessed on 3/26/2011)

in Christ entails our citizenship. Periodically we are faced with stark choices about our common life today and the kind of future that we can anticipate.

School referendum elections determine whether our education system will remain strong and vital—but often these turn into battlegrounds that divide communities. Empty-nesters and other older adults say things like: “I don’t have any kids in the schools” or “my kids have graduated—we’ve paid our dues.” But, my dear friends in Christ, are not all the kids in our communities “our” children, regardless of our own age or circumstances?

In an article that recently appeared in Newsweek magazine, Fareed Zakaria wrote:

“American politics is now hyperresponsive to constituents’ interests. And all those interests are dedicated to preserving the past rather than investing for the future.... There are no special-interest groups for our children’s economic well-being, only for people who get government benefits right now.... That is why the federal government spends \$4 on elderly people for every \$1 it spends on those under 18. And when the time comes to make cuts, guess whose programs are first on the chopping board. That is a terrible sign of society’s priorities and outlook.”³

Once we start asking who are “our” children, the circle just keeps expanding. It becomes only natural for us to claim as “ours”:

- All the children and grandchildren of our homes and congregations who may have moved to other locales but who are still tied to us by bonds of kinship and care;
- All the children of Minnesota and the United States;
- All the children of God’s world, including the amazing youth of our companion synod, the Andhra Evangelical Lutheran Church in southern India.

Before I close this article, I need to address a question you may be wondering about. Does all this attention to the next generation mean that we no longer care about the “elders” in our homes, churches and communities? Far from it! One of my seminary professors liked to say: “Preach to the eighth graders, and everyone else will listen.” When we undertake the great generational task of raising up our children, when we make our young ones our priority—lo and behold, all of society and

³ Fareed Zakaria, “Are America’s Best Days Behind Us?” in Newsweek (March 14, 2011), p. 30.

all of the church is blessed. It's about those of us who have walked long in faith leaving the best legacy for the ones who will replace us in serving God's mission.

For reflection and discussion:

- How do you and the disciples in your congregation keep the promises you make every time you participate in a Baptism? What more might God be calling you to do for the baptized?
- What are some implications of the notion that Christian parents/adults never really "retire" from their responsibilities to the next generation?
- Why do we tend to under-estimate the number of children and youth in our communities?
- Besides school referendum elections, what are some other public policy issues that have a direct effect on the next generation?

May: Practicing Resurrection

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

Acts 2:42-47

The title of this column might puzzle you. "Practicing" Resurrection? What's that? The Resurrection is an event, not an assignment, right? The Resurrection is God's greatest miracle, the Father's vindication of the crucified Son, the definitive defeat of death. What's to "practice?"

Lutheran Christians rightly raise such questions. It's in our DNA, it's part of our vocation within the Body of Christ. We get nervous whenever someone tries to turn a gift into a duty or an obligation or even a "practice."

But sometimes our nervousness betrays us. The "happenedness" of the Resurrection too easily leads us to treat Easter as an event in our past. But what if Easter isn't over yet? What if the Resurrection is an event that unfolds in a transforming way of life?

Living into God's New Future

This seems to be what happened in the Jerusalem church that was birthed on Pentecost, the 50th Day of Easter. In Acts 2:42-27 (the basis for our 2011 Synod Assembly theme, Awe-Filled Worship: Doing Acts 2) we behold a gathering of Christ-followers living in this world still, but mindful that God in raising up Christ has opened up a brand new future for them, also.

So, rather than waiting for God to do something amazing, they live new lives characterized by Easter awe—a palpable sense of dwelling in the presence of the Risen Christ. God is active—outside of them but also in and through their faith-filled lives. They extend the Easter event through learning,

worshiping, sharing, praying, breaking bread, working wonders, welcoming new believers. Every day became a new adventure!

And notice especially the interplay between their public and private lives in verse 46:

Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts...

There was a rhythm established, hot on the heels of Pentecost, that valued both what happened in the public church (“the temple”) but also in the domestic church (“at home.”)

The Four Keys

This dynamic interplay of public-and-private undergirds the Next Generation vision for our synod. My March column (The Next Generation: Deep into the Marrow) offered a high-altitude overview of the Vibrant Faith Frame. This month we bring the plane down to a lower altitude, to focus on the Four Keys—ways “practicing resurrection” in the 21st century.

The Four Keys take seriously the experiential side of being Christian. Dr. David Anderson of Vibrant Faith Ministries quotes appreciatively from the American sociologist of religion, Robert Wuthnow:

Effective religious socialization comes about through embedded practices; (emphasis added) that is, through specific, deliberate religious activities that are firmly intertwined with the daily habit of family routines, of eating and sleeping, of having conversations, of adorning the spaces in which people live, of celebrating the holidays, and of being part of a community.⁴

Indeed, all living faiths have some sort of “embedded practices”—some very similar to our own. What makes these “practices of resurrection” is that we do them “in Christ.” The Four Keys represent four ways that the risen Christ lives in and through us, for the sake of the world.

⁴ Quoted in David W. Anderson, *From the Great Omission to Vibrant Faith: The Role of the Home in Renewing the Church*, © 2009, Vibrant Faith Publishing, p. 49

1. Caring Conversations

This one sounds so easy, so basic. The First Key—caring conversations—nudges us toward a practice that used to come more naturally for Christians, i.e. to check in with one another regularly on how the Christian walk is unfolding in the daily-ness of life.

In our atomized, cocooned, “wired” 21st century lives it is so easy to miss chances to connect with one another personally in our congregations and our homes. The more high-tech our lives become, though, the more we hunger for high-touch encounters with one another.

Caring Conversations need not be highly organized or intricately choreographed. A simple, leading question may be all you need: “How was your day? What happened at school or work? How did you meet God today?” Some households and church groups share “highs and lows” as part of the “agenda” of every meeting.

It’s tempting to skip over these brief personal sharing times, though. Parents of ‘tweens and teens can’t always get their kids to talk—so why bother trying? Or in church committees we want to “get on with business.” Ironically, as studies have revealed, we actually handle “business” more efficiently and effectively when we start our gatherings with some personal checking-in-time.

Moreover, caring conversations keep the boundaries of the Body of Christ “permeable,” i.e. able to invite and include seekers who are looking for the one true God. What if our homes and congregations became known as places where no topic is off limit and no potential conversation-partner is turned away?

2. Devotions

Caring conversations prepare us for the Second Key: devotions. Remember the verb that dwells within this word: **devote**. Devotions center us in the One who is utterly devoted to us, the God to whom we are utterly devoted. Devotions place our busy lives in the presence of the God and Father of us all, who raised Jesus the beloved Son from the dead.

Having devotions in our households or church groups need not be burdensome. Instead of setting the bar too high, let’s view devotions as moments-in-time when we take a brief break from the routine and remind ourselves that the Risen Christ is always with us—that we are not alone in the universe.

So reading Christ in our Home or another daily devotional guide—at the breakfast table or before bedtime—is never wasted time. Homes that include small children will want to use age-appropriate devotional resources. Dwelling in a verse of the Bible sustains us. More and more Lutherans are following ancient prayer practices like *lectio divina* (sacred reading): a four-step way of living with a verse or two for some moments that lead to prayer (For a simple introduction to *lectio divina* see the ELCA resource *Prayer: Jump Start Your Prayer Life*).

3. Rituals and Traditions

Closely akin to devotions is the Third Key: rituals and traditions. These are healthy habits and routines that sustain the Easter life God has opened up for us by raising Jesus from the dead. The rituals and traditions we actually embrace will be many and varied. The Third Key includes:

- How we adorn our homes and church buildings with symbols of living faith;
- How we pray upon rising, before meals, and at the close of the day;
- How we bless and commend one another to God every day or before every journey or farewell;
- How we immerse ourselves in art, music and other forms of beauty that reveal God’s love;
- How we mark life’s milestones in homes and in congregations;
- How we practice forgiveness and reconciliation with one another;
- How we baptize, affirm, marry, heal and bury “in Christ.”

I suggest a spirit of playfulness, imagination and variety—especially in our homes, as we develop rituals and traditions that “work” for us. When our children were little, Joy and I included very long “God bless” lists in night-time prayers (including even blessings for favorite stuffed animals—“all God’s creatures”), brought home fun table graces learned at family Bible camp (“Be Present at Our Table” to the tune of the Flintstones theme), and precious children’s hymns (“Have No Fear, Little Flock” was a favorite).

4. Service

The Fourth Key draws us out of our tight circles and into God’s wider world: service. Our caring conversations make us wonder how others are doing. Our devotions and traditions ground us in God who is always showing up in the face of the “least ones” around us (Matthew 25:31-46). Families,

homes and congregations “practice the Resurrection” as they follow the Risen Christ out into our communities and beyond.

Last November our family did something we’d thought about for years. We helped serve the community Thanksgiving Dinner at St Joseph’s Catholic Church of Moorhead (in cooperation with Trinity Lutheran Church and the Moorhead community). It was great: being with our neighbors, giving thanks for God’s abundance, reducing the loneliness that is a daily reality for so many. Afterward I was struck by how serving together in this way fed back into our family’s own caring conversations and prayers. Indeed, the Four Keys are intimately related to one another—playing off each other as “practices of the Resurrection.”

For reflection and discussion:

- The Four Keys aren’t the only “practices of the Resurrection” in the church. What are some other “embedded practices” that enliven faith in your homes and congregation?
- How have you observed “caring conversations” opening up a home or a congregation to include an outsider (or outsiders)?
- What pattern of devotions do you find to be most faith-strengthening and sustaining?
- How do you perceive connections between the Four Keys?

June: Taught and Caught

Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ.

St. Paul (I Corinthians 11:1)

Christians teach the faith to the next generation of disciples. Lutherans really believe in teaching the faith—just look at our grand tradition of confirmation instruction! Persons my age and older regale one another with stories of long class sessions with our venerable pastors, memorizing the catechism and countless Bible verses, and being publically “examined” by the minister in front of the whole congregation on Confirmation Sunday. I can still picture my confirmation class on May 25, 1969—all gussied up in white robes with red carnations, nervously fidgeting on metal folding chairs in the chancel of our little church, wondering which of the “Chief Parts” of Luther’s Small Catechism we would each be asked to recite (from memory) in front of all our relatives.

We were taught the faith, and I will never regret that. (I was one of the weird kids who ate that stuff up!) But did we also “catch” the faith in a living, enduring way? Not so long ago I came across my old confirmation class picture, and I was shocked to count up how few of us have maintained any discernible connection to Christ’s church. We were taught so well—what happened?

In my March column I described the five principles of the Vibrant Faith Frame, one of which goes like this: **“Faith is caught more than it is taught.”** This doesn’t mean that faith isn’t taught—it most assuredly is! But what is taught (in a confirmation classroom, for example) takes on flesh-and-bone only as it is also “caught” from other Christians, in daily life. Teaching is all too often a head trip; “catching” adds dimensions of observing, imitating, acting, serving, practicing and living out the Christian life.

Summer is a splendid time—especially in a four-season state like Minnesota—to capitalize on rich opportunities to “catch” the faith. In this month’s column I want to draw our attention to several of the ways that happens in our midst.

Vacation Bible School

Although the format has changed over the years, most of our congregations continue to offer a Vacation Bible School (VBS) experience sometime in the summer months. I sometimes wonder

whether one good week of VBS accomplishes nearly as much quality Christian nurture as does a whole year of Sunday School. How could that be? There are a number of reasons:

- VBS usually offers a more concentrated, sustained time together with learners.
- We feel freer to use all our senses and engage in more active learning and exploration in VBS.
- Many VBS programs are intentionally inter-generational and ecumenical.
- Many of our congregations involve middle schoolers and senior high youth as faith-mentors to little ones, a great chance to develop “apprenticeship” among our young disciples.
- VBS gets us moving, gets us out into God’s gorgeous creation, and affords us freedom to have fun as Christ is formed in us.

Outdoor Ministries

Across our Evangelical Lutheran Church in America there are some 145 outdoor ministries. These Bible camps and retreat centers “strive to strengthen, support and lift up the body of Christ through building relationships with others and with God while enjoying creation.”⁵

In terms of helping children, youth and families “catch” the faith, just about everything I said (above) about Vacation Bible School is also true of outdoor ministries. But our Bible camps also offer a “place apart” where we can leave our congregations and communities, encounter Christians from other communities, engage in “high adventure” experiences, and grow deeper in just about every aspect of Christian life.

Over the years I’ve participated in staff training at a number of our Bible camps, including Pathways and Luther Crest our synod’s two fine outdoor ministries. Always, always, always I thank the young adults who take a break from their post-secondary studies to serve Christ as counselors, lifeguards, cooks, nurses and groundskeepers at our Bible camps. They model a vibrant life in Christ that truly is “catching” for the youngsters who flock to our camps.

⁵ Taken from [ELCA Outdoor Ministries](#)

Mission Trips

Each summer an astounding number of our ELCA congregations send youth and adults on mission trips—within the U.S. and abroad. When he was with us for our synod assembly, ELCA Presiding Bishop Mark Hanson made reference to a study that revealed how recently, in a single year, some 1500 ELCA congregations invested over \$30 million in taking young people and adults on international mission trips. Although such statistics might well give us pause (is the investment really worth it?), there continues to be strong support for the “action-reflection” model that is at the heart of mission trip experiences.

Mission trips help participants “catch” the faith by giving them a glimpse of God’s big world, wider world, exposing them to persons in great need, opening up pathways to meaningful service, and offering chances to integrate faith and life. Today’s youth have a great hunger for meaningful engagement in God’s world—and mission trips are often cited as milestones or “turning points” in persons’ faith-journeys.

Weddings

This one may surprise you. Summertime has been and continues to be the time of the year for marriage celebrations. True confession time: as a parish pastor, I did not always count weddings among my favorite ministerial duties! But think about it: what a marvelous opportunity we have to reach out to young adults (the most unchurched cohort in the U.S. population) who literally “knock on our doors” to begin their married life in God’s house.

Two summers ago, I co-officiated at the wedding of our daughter Kristen and her husband Aaron. It was an amazing day because of the kind of deep, worshipful service the bridal couple had planned. Eager to have the Lord’s Supper be their first meal together as husband-and-wife, Kris and Aaron wanted the sacrament to be part of their marriage rite. I was deeply moved by the droves of young adults who came to the altar—eagerly, hungrily holding out their hands to receive the Body and Blood of Christ. When had I seen so many 20-somethings gathered around the Lord’s Table?

Wedding ceremonies also give us marvelous opportunities to share blessings, lift up the joys of family life, and expose our children to the faithfulness of older couples who have lived long within the bonds of holy matrimony. How might our congregations better seize these opportunities to help young adults “catch” the faith, in the context of the Christian wedding service?

"Pretending" Our Way into Believing

When we talk about "catching" the faith, we recognize that thinking or believing does not always precede acting. Sometimes we act or "behave" our way into a new way of thinking and believing. I love the story that Tony Campolo tells in one of his sermons:

"...I lectured at the University of Manchester in England and there were two young men who said, 'We want to come and work with your team in the cities of America. We want to work in the inner city for the summer, but we have to tell you something. Can we be missionaries with your organization even if we don't believe in God?'

"I paused for a moment and I said of course, but here's the deal: you've got to pretend you believe in God. All summer long you've got to do Bible studies with the boys and girls, sing gospel songs, play games, go to church with them on Sunday. If you do all the things that a believer would do, you can come. You don't have to be a believer.

*"You know what happened. Both of those young men are Anglican priests in England today. **They were transformed by what they did...**"⁶*

God grant you all a faith-"catching" summer!

For reflection and discussion:

- How have you been taught and also "caught" faith?
- How many of the four summer-time ways of "catching" faith (discussed in this column) do you observe in your congregation? What are some additional ways your congregation makes faith "contagious?"
- How might your church "add value" to these faith-catching experiences?
- How does the Tony Campolo story strike you?

⁶ [30 Good Minutes \(Program #5218\) – Earning the Right to be Heard](#) – February 8, 2009 (emphasis added).

July: Reaching and Reclaiming Young Adults

Sometimes I think that the “Holy Grail” we’re most feverishly searching for in today’s church is an answer to the question: “How can we reach out to and reclaim our young adults?” It’s become commonplace to observe that young adults, ages 18-35, make up the most unchurched cohort in the U.S. population. Every serious Christian church or group is trying to develop strategies to turn this situation around.

Someone has sagely observed, however, that “it took us a long time to get this far into the woods, so it will probably take just as long for us to get out of the woods.” Our failure to capture the hearts and minds of our young adults didn’t just happen overnight. It took us a while to get to this regrettable state—and it will take us a while to get out (assuming we can “get out”).

Perhaps the worst thing we can do is to care about this question for all the wrong reasons. “‘One of the reasons many churches don’t do evangelism well is that their motivation is self-serving,’ says Tom Brackett, church planting specialist for the Episcopal Church. Brackett believes that a focus on evangelism primarily as a church growth strategy is counterproductive, especially with young adults, and at a time when the world is longing for evidence that God is with us. A more positive approach to evangelism for many, he suggests, lies ‘in pointing out the ways that God is already active, transforming lives, and connecting us to each other.’”⁷

So if we care about connecting more deeply with our young adults, we’ll do well to begin with a deep commitment to *understanding* them, their values and their quest for meaning in an unsettled world—coupled with a fearless determination to *know* them (by name!), listen to them and be ready to call forth their gifts in today’s church. And even though this may seem daunting, we’ll discover that we already have many touch points with the young adults in our churches and communities.

In fact, the Next Generation vision works out of an asset-based theology of abundance, so the first place we’ll look for assets is in our own backyards. Let me suggest several resources we already have at our disposal for deepening our connections with young adults.

⁷ Sheryl A. Kujawa-Holbrook, *Evangelism and the Under-Thirty Crowd*, published by the Alban Institute and available at <http://www.alban.org/conversation.aspx?id=9141>

Ministries in Higher Education

The Reformation that Martin Luther inspired started out in a university setting (the University of Wittenberg in Germany, where Luther was a professor.) We Lutherans have never forgotten that, which is why we still have some of the liveliest and most fruitful ministries in higher education.

One facet of these ministries involves the 26 colleges of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. Not all of the ELCA's 65 synods have church-related colleges on their territories, but we have Concordia College, Moorhead, one of the "crown jewels" of the ELCA. Our synod's office is located on the Concordia campus, I serve ex officio as a member of the college's board of regents, and we have many other long-standing and treasured connections with Concordia. As I travel across our synod I constantly run into congregational leaders who proudly wear their distinctive red "Cobber" rings.

Here's what you may now know, though. The colleges of the ELCA, most of them founded by congregations or associations of congregations and individual Lutherans, are nowadays often in the giving role more than the receiving role. Our ELCA colleges are "giving back" to the churches that birthed them. This becomes clear when we consider some of the ministry programs in which Concordia College participates in our synod:

- The Fabric of Mutual Ministry program that helps first-call pastors and rostered lay leaders thrive in their early years of rostered service;
- The Pastor to Pastor program which supports veteran ministers in their challenging work;
- The Office of Vocation and Church Leadership that sponsors continuing education events, discussions on timely ministry topics and other ways of connecting the campus and the churches; and
- The newly developed *Forum on Faith and Public Life* which is in the process of calling a new director to help people of faith broaden and deepen the ways their Christian identity finds expression in the wider world.

So here are some questions to ask in your congregation:

- Do you know how many young adults from your congregation are attending Concordia or one of the other 25 ELCA colleges?

- Do you know their names and make sure that they hear regularly from your congregation? Do you pray for them regularly in the Sunday morning “prayer of the church?”
- Do you provide financial support for their studies?
- Do we seek out ways to welcome them home and hear their stories when they’re back in your communities for vacation breaks?
- Do you exhibit a genuine curiosity about what they’re learning and how their college experience is helping them grow in their sense of vocation (“calling”) in Christ Jesus?

An equally-significant facet of our church’s ministries in higher education involves Lutheran Campus Ministry (LCM). “ELCA campus ministry is a Lutheran ministry on campus, not just a ministry to Lutherans. It provides an ELCA presence at more than 180 state and private colleges and universities, with cooperating congregations in campus ministry at an additional 400 campuses nationwide.”⁸ In Minnesota we help support ten of these campus ministries, two of which are on the territory of our synod: Bemidji State University and Minnesota State University, Moorhead.

I sometimes tell my two children that they owe their very lives to Lutheran Campus Ministry, because it was in the LCM center at Minnesota State University, Mankato, where my wife Joy and I first met. We are not alone; LCM centers have been bringing young adults together for worship, fellowship, service and mission for decades.

During the economic downturn and the unsettledness in our ELCA, our funding for campus ministry has been severely diminished, however. This has led our synod and other synods to seek ways to expand the financial support for LCM by inviting all congregations to make LCM a “line item” benevolence (in addition to the support our synod budget gives to Lutheran Campus Ministry of Minnesota—currently about \$55,000 each ^(OBJ)year). Our 2011 synod assembly passed a resolution that invites congregations of the synod “to provide within their missional budgets direct support (for example: 1% of a congregations annual 23 budget) for Campus Ministries at Bemidji State University and Minnesota State University Moorhead.” I encourage you to share this resolution with members of your congregation and please take steps now to lift up the need for financial support for our synod’s two closest campus ministries.

⁸ Source: <http://www.elca.org/Growing-In-Faith/Ministry/Campus-Ministry.aspx>

Some more questions to ponder in your congregation:

- Do you know how many young adults from your congregation are attending a state college or university served by Lutheran Campus Ministry? (Find a list of all such institutions of higher education at elca.org)
- Have you informed the Lutheran campus pastor(s) at these school(s) that one or more young adults from your congregation are on their campus(es)?
- Do you know the names of these young adults and make sure that they hear regularly from your congregation? Do you pray for them regularly in the Sunday morning “prayer of the church?” Do you provide financial support for their studies?
- Do we seek out ways to welcome them home and hear their stories when they’re back in your communities for vacation breaks?
- Do you exhibit a genuine curiosity about what they’re learning and how their college experience is helping them grow in their sense of vocation (“calling”) in Christ Jesus?

Military Chaplaincies

Another segment of the young adults from our congregations and communities includes those serving their country through a branch of the U.S. military. ELCA Lutherans have a long history of providing military chaplains to offer the ministry of the Gospel to these young soldiers. Currently the Office of Federal Chaplaincies in the ELCA is headed by the Rev. Darrell Morton who served three congregations in the Laporte area earlier in his ministry. You can find out more about military chaplains and the ways they serve young adults who are in the armed forces at elca.org. Because many of these young adults have served or are serving “deployments” in Afghanistan and Iraq, it’s especially important to think about ways that all of our congregations can welcome them home and help them re-integrate into our communities. Our ELCA provides some good resources in this regard.

So, once again, some questions:

- Do you know how many young adults from your congregation or community between ages 18 and 35 are serving in the U.S. military?
- Do you know their names, and do you regularly share their stories through parish communications networks? Do you pray for these young soldiers?

- Are there members of your church who might be willing to give focused attention to these young adults—corresponding with them, knowing them, and being ready to assist them in tangible ways, as the needs arise?

Hothouse Experiments

Thus far I've listed some of the “tried and true” ways our church has already been connecting with young adults. But we realize, at some level, that we also need to be open to fresh ways of reaching and reclaiming young adults. What are some of the promising “hothouse experiments” that ELCA folks are engaged in, in young adult ministries?

At our synod assembly in May it was great to welcome Pastor Adam Copeland, the new (since April 1) mission developer for The Project FM, an emerging ministry among young adults in the Fargo-Moorhead area. Did you know that the F-M area includes some 45,000 young adults—most of whom are not meaningfully connected with a Christian congregation? Pastor Adam and the Project FM team are on the “front lines” of experimenting with new ways to embrace young adults, learn from them and provide them with meaningful ways to live out their faith in God’s world. One of the intriguing ways this is happening right now involves something called TheologyPub, five Monday evenings this summer when young adults are invited to talk about topics in faith and life with their peers and Pastor Adam.

If you live at a distance from the Fargo-Moorhead area, why should you care about The Project FM? It’s critical that we ALL pay attention to “hothouse experiments” like this—because we’ll never know what WE might learn for young adult ministries in OUR local ministry settings. And because The Project FM is an ELCA mission development supported by both the Eastern North Dakota and Northwestern Minnesota Synods, we all have a stake in investing in this creative ministry with our prayers and financial support www.theprojectfm.org.

My dear friends in Christ, if you think that your congregation doesn’t have a “foot in the door” with young adult ministries—guess again. That’s the point of this month’s Next Generation column: we already have multiple ways to connect with our young adults—but are we taking advantage of those opportunities? And thanks to our partnership in the ELCA we also have an investment in “hothouse experiments” like The Project FM. Through ministries like these God is opening doors for us to reach out to and reclaim our young adults.

For reflection and discussion:

- Who in your congregation has a passion for reaching out to and reclaiming young adults for Christ's mission in the world? How could you invite such persons to act upon this passion?
- As you ponder the questions included in this article, in what areas is your congregation excelling? Where could you do better? What is ONE area of ministry with young adults in which you'd be willing to make a greater investment?
- In addition to ministries in higher education, military chaplaincies and "hothouse experiments" in young adult ministry what are some other ways that your congregation might reach and reclaim young adults?

August: Buried Treasure

I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground.

Matthew 25:25

Perpetual Care

Last month, as my sisters and I made plans for our mother's memorial service, we discussed ministries and causes for which people might want to offer memorial gifts. One possibility popped up that I quickly vetoed: memorial gifts to the cemetery fund of my mom's home church.

Even I was a little surprised at how swiftly and strongly I said "No" to this option. After all, burying the dead is one of the seven corporal deeds of mercy⁹ that Christians have historically practiced. Churches rightly set aside "God's acre" (a cemetery) as a seedbed for the resurrection, and it is right to treat the blessed dead with the respect that children of God deserve.

But giving memorial gifts to the cemetery fund just struck me as wrong, wrong, wrong. I knew, for example, that my mom's congregation had built up a tidy sum in its cemetery fund—with more than enough dollars to provide "perpetual care" for the cemetery. (By the way, how many of our congregations in northwestern Minnesota have had a thoughtful conversation about how large a church cemetery fund needs to be? How many of us have said a gracious but firm, "thanks, but please give those dollars to a mission project or other cause," instead of over-subscribing the cemetery fund?)

Moreover, it seemed to me that my mom—who directed so much of her energy to the next generation in her own family and church—would not be remembered well by an un-needed investment in the last generation.

And therein lies the rub for us all. **Are we as followers of Jesus and members of the Body of Christ really *investing* in the next generations of disciples?** Or are we "stuck"—giving ourselves to the generations that have come and gone before us (perhaps without even realizing it?)

⁹ The seven corporal (corporal="bodily") deeds of mercy are feeding the hungry, tending the thirsty, clothing the naked, giving shelter to the homeless, caring for the sick, visiting prisoners, and burying the dead—cf. [Matthew 25:31-46](#).

Being Afraid and Burying

As I was musing over these questions I remembered one of my favorite Bible stories, the Parable of the Talents in Matthew 25. A man who is soon to travel to a distant country asks three of his servants to tend his money while he is gone. Each man receives a fabulous amount of money to invest and “grow” while the master is gone. Two of the servants take risks with their master’s money and double its value. The third servant is overcome by fear—and all he can think of is burying the money in the ground until the master returns.

Fear or suspicion or despair can lead us to bury the treasures God has entrusted to us. That is true for us as individuals and as communities of Christ. Fear freezes us, suspicion paralyzes us, despair chokes us—so burial seems like our only option. But, as the Parable of the Talents reveals, the master is mightily displeased with such responses. Church, have we heard that? Are we paying attention? It drives our Lord Jesus nuts to see us “burying” the treasures we’ve been given.

How About Us?

All of this has a direct connection with the Next Generation vision for our synod. I have been inviting us to give ourselves to this purpose: “...to serve God’s mission by focusing [the synod’s] entire life on calling forth, raising up, forming in faith and spiritual leadership, and sending the next generations of disciples of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

The voting members of our 2011 synod assembly formally affirmed this vision, and everyone I’ve shared it with has affirmed it. But how are we doing in actually investing ourselves in what this vision calls us to be and do?

This month of August, as we linger a little longer in summer-time reflection and refreshment, I invite us to ask ourselves: where are we investing ourselves in the next generation in our homes, our congregations, our communities? Where do we need to “adjust our investment portfolio” to reflect the future-orientation to which our Risen Lord Jesus beckons us?

Let me suggest some possibilities:

Are we so invested in “shy Lutheran reticence” that we have buried God’s marvelous gift of hospitality? I can’t tell you how strange it is to walk into one of the congregations of our synod on a Sunday morning, extend my hand in greeting, introduce myself to a church member—and be met with nothing but stony silence. (I’m not making this up—it happens with astonishing frequency.) My

dear sisters and brothers in Christ, how hard is it to smile, return a simple greeting and speak a word of welcome to one another? The next generation of disciples is looking for a church that values relationships.

Are we so invested in nostalgia for a lost golden age (which, come to think of it, wasn't really as "golden" as we remember it) that we have buried God's future-opening gift of evangelical imagination? In one of the congregations I served earlier in my ministry, folks frequently referred to the 1950s "when we had hundreds of kids in Sunday School." Such recollections made me a little nervous ("Pastor, if you'd just work harder we could go back to that!") but they also left me wondering what exactly "the point" was. Such nostalgia never seemed to lead us anywhere; people simply seemed to pine for an era that has come and gone. They were speechless when we tried to wonder how this glorious past might shape our response to a very different future. My precious fellow disciples, what piece of nostalgia has captured your congregation and buried your evangelical imagination? What piece of the past do you need to move beyond to embrace God's future? The next generation of disciples hungers for hope that will open them to God's future.

Are we so invested in "my" congregation that we have buried God's gift of "holy togetherness" with other fellow-travelers in the faith? Every day it simply becomes plainer and plainer to me that God's promised future for us in northwestern Minnesota is going to involve many more missional connections in the forms of parish alignments, "regional parishes," and other types of shared ministry. My fellow-travelers, is your congregation regularly opening up avenues for discussing and dreaming with your near neighbors about how together you might become both more faithful and more fruitful in doing God's work? For the next generation of disciples, networking comes naturally—how can we learn from them?

Are we so invested in drawing sharp boundaries, "circling the wagons" and being right that we have buried God's risky gift of missional openness to our neighbors and our world? In the ELCA disaffiliation struggles in our synod over the last two years, I've been disheartened by how seldom a congregation connects its intention to leave the ELCA with an explicit desire to better serve God's mission in the world. Frankly, mission hasn't even been "on our screens" in most of these conversations, despite my best efforts to bring it up.

My friends, **how open is your congregation to its neighbors and the wider world?** Where might you pray for God to open up a door and fling open a window—to *all* the persons and the whole creation that God is making new in Christ Jesus? The next generation of disciples *longs to make a difference in God's world.*

Where else in your congregation's life are you burying some gift of God and missing a chance to invest yourselves in the Next Generation? As you prepare for another autumn and a new year of ministry programs, what is the single most important thing your congregation could do to call forth, raise up, form in faith and spiritual leadership, and send the next generation of disciples of our Lord Jesus Christ?

For reflection and discussion:

- This month I invite you to use the questions under "How About Us?" for personal reflection and discussion.

September: Almost Christian

“I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.”

Galatians 2:20

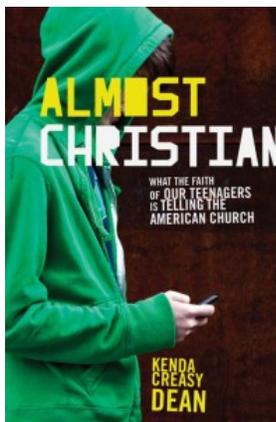
“A world of nice people, content in their own niceness, looking no further, turned away from God, would be just as desperately in need of salvation as a miserable world and might even be more difficult to save.”

C.S. Lewis

“Christianity has died many times and risen again; for it had a God who knew the way out of the grave.”

G.K. Chesterton

A Book Report, of Sorts



Consider this my “what I did on summer vacation” column in this Next Generation series. Really, it’s a book report of sorts. Earlier this year I drew your attention to David Anderson’s book, *The Great Omission*; over the summer one of the books I read was in a similar vein—Kenda Creasy Dean’s, *Almost Christian: What the Faith of Our Teenagers is Telling the American Church* (Oxford, 2010). Dean, a United Methodist pastor, is Professor of Youth, Church, and Culture at Princeton Theological Seminary in New Jersey. In her book she reflects on findings of the National Study of Youth and Religion (NSYR), conducted in 2005.

“Moralistic Therapeutic Deism”

A central finding of the NSYR was that most teens in America follow a faith that is (in a phrase first coined by John Wesley in the 1700s) “almost Christian”—Moralistic Therapeutic Deism (MTD), the **“default” religion of American youth**. Dean describes MTD in these terms: “Religion helps you to be nice (it’s moralistic) and feel good (it’s therapeutic), but otherwise God stays out of the way except in emergencies (it’s Deist). That’s what most teenagers think. The ways they described God

in the study were revealing; God was either the cosmic butler (staying out of the way until called upon to meet my needs) or the divine therapist (God’s main goal is to help me feel good about myself).” ¶ Please note, though, that American teenagers follow MTD not because they have misunderstood what their churches taught them about Christianity. Rather, MTD is the version (or perversion?) of Christian faith that their churches have taught them. “MTD is not just the default position of American teenagers;” declares Dr. Dean, “it’s the default religion of American adults, too. [Those who conducted the NSYR] conclude that Moralistic Therapeutic Deism has ‘colonized’ American churches and is now the ‘dominant religion’ in the United States, having ‘supplanted Christianity.’” A key feature of Moralistic Therapeutic Deism is the way **it prizes “niceness.”** Now, there is certainly a place for being kind to others—though Jesus spoke more often about stronger sentiments like compassion, justice and self-emptying love. “The cult of niceness is basically a low-risk version of hospitality,” observes Dr. Dean. “But Christianity is much, much more than this. When Jesus asks us to love one another, he’s not talking about finding common ground and avoiding touchy subjects of conversation. He’s talking about laying down our lives for one another, which raises the stakes past where most of us want to go. Ironically, teenagers get this. They are in the middle of the age-old human quest of finding something worth staking their lives on, not just a Sunday night.”

Missional Imagination

“Our first task as adults who are invested in young people’s lives...”

If Moralistic Therapeutic Deism represents a perversion of Christian faith and life, **what needs to replace it?** Kenda Creasy Dean points toward a “missional imagination” that inevitably takes us beyond ourselves. “**Having a missional imagination,**” she observes, “just means being the church for others—for people who have no interest in the church whatsoever—instead of primarily focusing on ourselves. In the U.S., many churches got in the habit of thinking that our job is to make everyone else look like us. Christianity is not about cloning ourselves; it’s about following Jesus.” How does we cultivate such a missional imagination? According to Dr. Dean this happens through timehonored faith practices that are meant for the entire Christian community—children, youth and adults alike. She develops, at some length, three of these faith practices:

Translation: “Taking one form of a message and making it into another form that newcomers to the conversation can understand—is a time-honored missionary practice. The Incarnation of Christ serves as our model for translation.... We’re called to be translations of God’s love... and while we don’t do it perfectly, the idea is to translate God’s love through a human life: ours.”

Testimony: "...The art of testimony is the art of putting our faith stories into words, so we can talk about faith the way we talk about everything else that is important in our lives."

Detachment: This is "...the art of getting out of our own way.' Medieval mystics used the word 'detachment' to describe the practice of detaching ourselves from the things that distract us from Christ, so that we can reattach our gaze upon Christ alone. "

For the Whole Church—Youth and Adults

If we love our youth and genuinely want them to **embrace something stronger and sturdier** than Moralistic Therapeutic Deism, we need to focus not just on the youth themselves, but on the adults (especially parents) who are so instrumental in forming Christ within them. "For the most part, teenagers aren't coming to faith, growing in faith, or serving in faith because of a youth group or a summer program," according to Kenda Creasy Dean. "Where young people meaningfully encounter the transforming love of Jesus Christ is through their families, their congregations, and the deep investment of faithful adults who take an interest in them." So the best way to "focus on our youth" is—ironically—to NOT focus just on young people and age segmented ministries with youth, but on the adults (us!) who are continually shaping their lives. This means so much more than having a great Sunday School, a cool confirmation program or a fantastic youth group. **"Our first task as adults who are invested in young people's lives,"** declares Dr. Dean, "is to live alongside these young people as though we believe what we preach and to invite them into a Christ following way of life alongside us." We are anchored in a magnificent, compelling Story—something far more sustaining and nurturing than the thin soup of Moralistic Therapeutic Deism. We don't have to manufacture this Story—the words of it come to us as gifts from the chain of witnesses of Jesus Christ that extends back through time, via the Scriptures, creeds and confessions of Christianity. We already have the words that can capture the Next Generation for Jesus Christ. I'll let Kenda Creasy Dean have the final word here: "Our words say that God overcomes death, that even death cannot stop God from righting a capsized world. Our words say that God loves teenagers so much that death on a cross was not too far for God to go in order to win them. Our words say that God's love is 'to die for,' literally, and every teenager on the planet recognizes that as the sign of true love. What gives me hope is that teenagers are more willing to risk this kind of love than we are to ask it of them. Whatever shape the church takes next, I suspect 'a little child will lead us.' I commend *Almost Christian: What the Faith of Our Teenagers is Telling the American Church* to everyone in our synod who cares about children, youth, young adults and the homes where they are nurtured in Christian discipleship. *God bless your September!*

For discussion and reflection:

Note: These questions are drawn from the Study Guide for the book, *Almost Christian*, that can be found on Kenda Creasy Dean's website.

1. **What's wrong with Moralistic Therapeutic Deism?** What's the big deal?
2. **How would you describe your congregation's attitude toward Christian teenagers?** Does your church tend to view young people primarily as people who will save the church from extinction, who will serve the church as members, or who are called to be the church?
3. **What would change if your church recruited adult volunteers** with youth on the basis of sharing a God they love versus sharing a faith they know about?
4. **Is there anyone in your life who talks about faith in a way that you admire?** Why? Have you ever heard somebody talk about faith in a way that embarrassed you? What made you uncomfortable?
5. **How does your congregation understand conversion**—as a “one-shot deal” or “an ongoing process?” What difference does that make for ministry?
6. **Imagine a continuum: on one end is frustration, on the other end is hope.** Where are you in terms of your attitude toward forming young people in consequential faith? Are you closer to hope or closer to frustration?

October: The 2020 Crossover

Behold, children are a heritage from the LORD, the fruit of the womb is a reward. Like arrows in the hand of a warrior, so are the children of one's youth.

Psalm 127:3-4 (NKJV)

Honor your father and your mother, as the Lord your God commanded you, so that your days may be long and that it may go well with you in the land that the Lord your God is giving you.

Deut. 5:16

One of the privileges of my ministry is the opportunity to meet and learn from other leaders across our state and nation. Last month, as I retreated for 24 hours with other "heads of communions" that are part of the Minnesota Council of Churches, we heard a compelling presentation from Mr. Tom Gillaspy, the state demographer for Minnesota.

Statistics or "Sadistics?"

Now, I realize that statistics aren't everyone's cup of tea. (When my daughter took a college class in the subject, she deliberately mispronounced "statistics" as "sadistics!") But we can learn much, for the sake of mission and ministry, about what statisticians study on a daily basis. Demographers like Gillaspy carefully count the "trees" so that we can discern how the "forest" seems to be growing or not growing, as the case may be.

In the midst of a wide-ranging presentation on the U.S. Census of 2010, Mr. Gillaspy dropped one factoid that has been exercising my imagination. As I reported in my Next Generation column last March, it may surprise us to realize that in 17 of the 21 counties of our synod there are more children and youth under the age of 18 than there are senior adults who are age 65+. In fact, this is and has been true across our entire state of Minnesota, as well.

But in less than a decade all of this will change. Gillaspy shared a chart that revealed the population trend-lines, for youth and seniors, as crossing over in 2020. When this "2020 Crossover" hits, our state will have more seniors than youth. Awareness of this reality is already influencing political debate in Minnesota. Two of the biggest portions of our state government's budget involve education aid to public schools offering K-12 education and support for long-term care for needy

seniors. In this regard, Gillaspay pointed out that what it costs us to educate one K-12 student for *one year* is roughly what it costs us to maintain one senior adult in a long-term care facility for *one month*.

Pause for a moment, and let that sink in.

Having recently served as power-for-attorney for a frail elderly adult, I can testify to the truth of Mr. Gillaspay's observations. I was startled at how quickly my late mother's financial resources were drawn down by each monthly rent check paid to her assisted-living facility. Yikes!

Inter-Generational Competition

One of the implications of these demographic trends is **the disturbing specter of inter-generational competition and even strife**. Frail elderly persons (whose ranks many of us will be joining!) will need more and more from a system whose resources are not infinite. Young workers will be supporting— through their Social Security and Medicare taxes—a burgeoning number of senior adults, making it all the more challenging to save up for their own retirements.

Precisely at this point we as people of Christian faith are called to speak up and enter the political discussions swirling around us. Perhaps even more vitally, we need to engage deeply in the cultural conversation about the place and role of all the generations on our planet—from the youngest to the eldest.

Getting In A Word Edgewise

We come to these encounters with some deep convictions, drawn from the wellspring of biblical wisdom.

First, we have a bias against viewing the world solely through the lens of “what’s in it for me.” We have been fashioned by a generous Creator who bestows gifts in just one way: abundantly. There is enough to satisfy everyone’s need, but not everyone’s greed. Living as Christian disciples we are called to speak out from the profound apostolic perspective that “you are not your own...you were bought with a price” (I Cor. 6:19b-20a).

Second, we will resist every effort to pit the interests of one generation over against the interests of another generation. The scriptural witness is that God values the whole human family and the whole

human being in every stage of development from the dawn of life to the sunset of earthly death—and, indeed, God’s care extends beyond earthly death, in the power of Christ’s Resurrection!

The psalmist rightly calls children a heritage from the Lord (Psalm 127). We have a profound stake in the Next Generation of disciples. But we also care deeply about those who have walked long in Christian faith. The Fourth Commandment was given, originally, for the sake of older parents—an injunction to adult “children” not to abandon or dis-respect the generation that brought them into this world. When we exercise proper care for all the generations, we will taste the fruits of the Fourth Commandment, which includes a promise: “so that your days may be long and that it may go well with you in the land that the Lord your God is giving you” (Deuteronomy 5).

Third, we will cling to the hope that is ours in Christ Jesus. These are sobering, even desperate, times. If we stare right into the teeth of the awful truth that demographers bring to our attention, we will lose heart.

But, as I am fond of saying, **demography is not necessarily destiny**. We believe, teach and confess that the God in whom we trust is the God who specializes in “hopeless cases.” The great British writer and Christian apologist, G.K. Chesterton, hit the nail on the head when he observed:

“Christianity has died many times and risen again; for it had a God who knew the way out of the grave.”

Beating Back Paralysis

As I write this column, I have fresh memories of our two weeks with five visitors from the Andhra Evangelical Lutheran Church (AELC). The AELC carries out its mission and ministry on the teeming sub-continent of India—with 1.2 billion citizens of the world’s largest democracy. A signature ministry of the AELC involves youth and education; church-sponsored schools are one of many “open doors” to India’s “seekers” who want to find out about the way of Jesus Christ.

Disciples of the Christ cannot sit out this critical discussion in our political life and in our wider culture.

As we visited some of the splendid long-term care facilities in our synod that are affiliated with our Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, our AELC friends talked about the fact that they don’t have anything comparable to our long-term care system. All too often, the elderly in India are reduced to

begging—and their families end up abandoning them. (This isn't necessarily as cruel as it sounds; some families are forced to choose between feeding the children or caring for the seniors, as a matter of economic necessity.) This is a source of piercing pain for our sisters and brothers of the AELC.

Disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ cannot sit out this critical discussion in our political life and in our wider culture. God calls us to give voice to the convictions that arise from the Word of God, for this time and place. God invites passionate Jesus- communities to enter the fray and ask ourselves: "How might we reshape our ministries to respond to the challenges that will come with the '2020 Crossover?'"

For reflection and discussion:

1. What feelings do you experience as you read about the "2020 Crossover?"
2. Where do you already see signs of inter-generational competition in our communities?
3. The column lifts up three implications from biblical wisdom for how Christian disciples will engage in the cultural conversation about the "2020 Crossover." What other implications for this discussion do you draw from God's Word?
4. What is one way your congregation might start preparing now for the ministry challenges that will come with the "2020 Crossover?"

November: Welcoming the Least Ones

People were bringing little children to [Jesus] in order that he might touch them; and the disciples spoke sternly to them. But when Jesus saw this, he was indignant and said to them, ‘Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.’ And he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them.

Mark 10:13-16

It’s so easy to get sentimental about kids. Ours is a culture that dotes on little ones. We go gaa-gaa over adorable infants, make extraordinary sacrifices for our offspring, outdo one another in “hyper-parenting.” Willing to do just about anything for our youngsters, we vow to give them the best the world has to offer. So when we encounter verses like these from Mark 10, we assume that folks in Jesus’ day also lived in a child-centered culture like ours.

But, even though Jesus’ contemporaries regarded children as a blessing from the Lord (Psalm 127:3), they were nowhere near as “mushy” about children as we tend to be.¹⁰

The Roman empire of the first century tolerated abandonment of infants born with defects or other deficits. Jewish people loved their children, but in a way that reflected the usefulness of children in family structures of a subsistence society. Children in Jesus’ day were routinely valued for their utility. They were not the center of the world; they existed very much on the periphery of adult life.

Jesus Goes Against the Grain

So Jesus’ welcoming of little children, touching them and blessing them, definitely went against the grain of his culture. We see this in the harsh reaction of the disciples who were annoyed, no doubt wishing that the children would be removed from the scene—believing that “children should be seen but not heard.”

In the face of this all-too-natural reaction of his followers, Jesus’ vehemence in making space for children is striking. He indignantly rebukes his well-meaning followers, speaking to them as harshly

¹⁰ James L. Bailey, “Experiencing the Kingdom as a Little Child: A Rereading of Mark 10:13-16” in *Word and World* (Winter 1995)

as he spoke when casting out demons Jesus was not soft-in-the-head when it came to kids. Jesus wasn't merely saying to his disciples, "Give the kids a break already." No. Jesus raised the stakes in this amazing encounter—declaring that children somehow have an inside corner on life in God's kingdom. Children should be seen, heard and allowed to be our teachers! If we want to come under Jesus' glorious but gentle reign, we best take our cues from the "least ones."

How so? Surely Jesus didn't view children as innocent (they aren't!). Neither did Jesus single out children because they demonstrate an attitude of dependence (as if being aligned with God's kingdom is about an attitude!)

Rather, Jesus prized children because they simply are weak, dependent, and unable to make it on their own. Children give God room to do what God does best—save us, set us right, give us life. In this respect, Jesus' welcoming of children is akin to his bias toward notorious sinners, lost souls, prostitutes, tax collectors, and others who are at the end of their rope.

The Body of Christ Values Children

Because Jesus welcomed children and other "least ones," the community that bears his name will do no less. Here is another facet of the Next Generation vision. Our Lord invites us to care for all God's children, to be sure. But within this invitation is a particular calling to tend the least ones in our midst. For in them we behold the core of God's preferred way for us to live our lives.

So, who are the least ones around us? Who—because they may be easily overlooked—will we want to keep our eyes peeled for in this time and place? Let me suggest four groups of children among us whom we dare not overlook:

Children who reflect the emerging face of America

Last month's column about the "2020 Crossover" drew upon gleanings from the 2010 U.S. Census. What I didn't mention was the fact that the population of our state grew by 7.8% from 2000 to 2010, and over 2/3 of this population growth took place among persons of color/primary language other than English.

Jesus meets us in the radiant, multi-hued faces of children who reflect Hispanic, Asian, Native American, African American, African immigrant or other non-white cultural groups. The "complexion"

of the mission field in northwestern Minnesota is changing. Do we regard this as a threat or an opportunity in serving God's mission?

Children living in poverty

As I write this column the "Occupy" (e.g. "Occupy Wall Street") phenomenon is sweeping across our country and the world. Whether or not you agree with all the opinions expressed by these folks, they are drawing attention to the disturbing disparity of wealth that is threatening the social fabric across the globe. The U.S. Census revealed that "the number of people in poverty in 2010 (46.2 million) is the largest number in the 52 years for which poverty estimates have been published."¹¹ The rate of children living in poverty in our country has been rising. Who are the poor children in your mission field? Why are they poor and what can your congregation do to welcome them?

Children facing bullies

The phenomenon of bullying is nothing new. But in recent years bullying focused on kids who don't fit in has found new intensity via the Internet, triggering a disturbing number of teen suicides. At both our synod assembly and our ELCA churchwide assembly measures were passed that commit our church along with other partners "to support and offer preventative programs addressing bullying, harassment, and other related violence, especially with higher risk populations." Who are the children being bullied in your community, and how might people of faith demonstrate that bullying will not be tolerated?

Children of deployed military parent

In mid-October I attended a conference in the Twin Cities about the unique challenges faced by the over two million military-related children in the U.S. In Minnesota right now there are 14,600 of these children who have one or more parents deployed in a military setting. Of these, over 1300 military kids reside in the twenty-one counties of our synod. Which of these youngsters do you know right now? Who needs your prayers, your encouragement, your practical assistance as they await the return of a mother or father from overseas military service (learn more at MilitaryChild.org)?

¹¹ <http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/poverty/about/overview/index.html>

Who else?

I've just barely begun to scratch the surface in this brief listing of the "least ones" among us. What other children and young people live in your mission field—who might be easy to overlook, but who are beloved by Christ who welcomed children, touched them and blessed them?

For reflection and discussion:

- How have children impacted your own faith and discipleship?
- Ponder (and discuss, if in a group) the questions embedded in the article in the final five sections.

December: Going the Distance

In [Jesus Christ] all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross. And you who were once estranged and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he has now reconciled in his fleshly body through death, so as to present you holy and blameless and irreproachable before him..."

Colossians 1:19b-22

The offense of the Cross began with the offense of the Incarnation. The bloody public death was foreshadowed by a bloody stable birth.

Virginia Stem Owens, "A Hand in the Wound"¹²

Once more we enter the season that remembers how far God has gone to embrace us, to melt away our distrust, to enter deeply into our fleshly lives. Advent and Christmas reveal a **God who goes the distance** from highest heaven to the lowest spot imaginable: a crude cattle shed.

And there is nothing airy or vague about this. It is a shockingly physical, jarringly specific, jaggedly concrete thing that God does: taking on "bone of our bone, flesh of our flesh" (Genesis 2:23) in the wailing newborn son of Mary.

Isolating Ourselves from the Incarnation

Recently, in my daily devotions, I read a piece that woke me up to this reality in a fresh way. Reflecting on her regular visits to the sick, writer Virginia Stem Owens observes:

"We are not so familiar with freaks as Jesus was. He daily handled as bad or worse than what I see weekly in the hospital. People coming to him for healing were maimed, mutilated, and desperate. They didn't even have on clean pajamas. It is we who have isolated ourselves from the Incarnation. Our fear of the flesh is so deep that we institutionalize death and decay wherever it breaks out. There would be little chance of Jesus meeting a leper on the road today. Any kind of freakishness, whether physical, mental, or emotional, must be put away from our midst. People on public view

¹² "A Hand in the Wound," by Virginia Stem Owens, quoted in *For All the Saints: A Prayer Book For and By the Church* (Volume IV) 1996, American Lutheran Publicity Bureau, pp. 980-982.

must be at least superficially healthy. The lame, the halt, and the blind may not have had Medicare in the first century, but neither were they incarcerated for their offense against the sensibilities of the whole.”

Although they sting, Owens’s words also ring true. And perhaps such reflections can help us resist the urge to reduce our December holy days to the gauzy, disembodied sentimentality so prized by our culture. Owens seeks to recover “our ardor for the Incarnation and...our sense of the profundity of our Lord’s bodily death and resurrection.” **Encountering real live persons in the extremities of life**—mental confusion, chronic illness, horrible abuse, tragic death—makes plain the lengths Christ went, going the distance for us and our salvation.

“Are we not already a little secretly ashamed of the stripes that heal us, wishing instead for an unscathed savior, Jesus Superjock, borne aloft by teams of angels unwilling to let him stub his well-shod toe?” Owens asks. “As I struggle to insert the purple swollen foot of a [hospitalized] diabetic into his slippers, I am also asserting my allegiance to the flesh, loved and not rejected by our Lord, who did not hesitate at the unhealthy, the flesh he clothed his own glory in, thus sanctifying it forever.”

The same Lord Jesus Christ who went the distance for us in his Incarnation, invites us to go the distance for our neighbors—including a willingness to enter deeply into their embodied lives. This, too, is part of the Next Generation vision we’ve been pondering over the past year. “Calling forth, raising up, forming in faith and spiritual leadership, and sending the next generations of disciples of our Lord Jesus Christ” is not a vague, airy enterprise. There is nothing disembodied about it. Our Lord invites us to roll up our sleeves and be ready to address the particularities of fleshly life, including the fleshly lives of our precious children.

The Safety and Well-Being of Children and Youth

Here’s a recent, disturbing example. In the last weeks we’ve been stunned by revelations of long-term sexual abuse of young people by a coach associated with one of the most successful programs in Big Ten college football. As a forty-count indictment is being drafted, new reports of abuse surface daily. Most shocking is the fact that some responsible adults had some awareness of the abuse that was happening— but they did little or nothing to stop it.

Our Lord’s incarnation among us, deep within the flesh of Jesus, son of Mary, **commits us to care about things** like the safety and sexual well-being of children and youth. Our Evangelical Lutheran

Church in America stands squarely on the side of “the least ones” in such matters. In social statements like Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust¹³ our church has identified specific ways in which we will pursue the health and well-being of the Next Generations among us. For example:

- “Safety within and outside the family is of overriding importance because the damage done to children and youth through sexual abuse or molestation can be remarkably deep and lasting....”
- “This church supports the prosecution of any individual who commits a sexual crime against a minor, including people in leadership positions in the church....”
- “The ELCA also recognizes that congregations and other ministry sites must continue in their efforts to be safe places for children and youth....This church calls for the adoption of preventive measures, including educational programs, appropriate policies, and screening of individuals who care for, supervise, or work with children within this church. It expects that all church leaders will report all instances of suspected child abuse....”
- “Commercial sexual exploitation is widespread throughout the United States and around the world. It continues to grow and involves surprising numbers of youth by taking advantage of their vulnerabilities....The ELCA regards the over-exposure of emotionally maturing children and teens to adult sexuality as a failing on the part of adults and society....”
- “Expanding cyberspace and other electronic media create new challenges to the protection of children and youth....How to address this problem is one of the most important child-protection issues of our time, and our church will be an active participant in this important conversation....”
- “The sexual education of children and teens will be supported as a priority by this church. Anecdotal evidence among teens suggests that few parents or congregations meaningfully engage young people in either sex education or healthy conversations about sexuality, even though teens would welcome them....”
- “...the ELCA reaffirms its interest in and responsibility for the care and protection of vulnerable children and youth. It understands itself as called to this mission through the vocations of its members, its own institutional practices, and its public policy positions. This work involves all adults, not only parents, since all contribute to the well-being of children and youth in untold creative ways. It understands that all

¹³ Available at elca.org All quotations in the following portion of the column come from the section of the social statement entitled “Protecting children and youth in and for trusting relationships.”

children and youth, both inside and outside the church, are deserving of this church's concern."

Going the Distance, Despite our Discomfort

You may be chagrined that I've dwelt on such an uncomfortable topic at such length—at the start of Advent, no less. Yuck! Not very "Christmasy" is it? Oh but it is, my dear sisters and brothers. The Incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ is about **God entering deeply into the thorniest, most anxiety-producing, disturbing aspects** of human life. This includes all the joys and perils of human sexuality. While it might seem that we've been paying too much attention to this topic in the life of our ELCA over the past two years, in truth we have focused so narrowly on one aspect (same-sex relationships) that we've virtually ignored all the other facets of human sexuality. And we adults have—in my experience in many congregations—largely left our children and youth out of this critical conversation.

Our God, who has gone the distance in becoming flesh, calls us to **go the distance with our children and youth**—to wrap them in a crucible of safety, to share with them our core values about human life in all its splendor and perplexity, to listen deeply to their piercing questions, to pick them up when they fall and reassure them of God's unconditional love, and to walk with them and engage them in honest conversation about how we might faithfully incarnate the life of Christ in our flesh—including our sexuality.

For reflection and discussion:

- Why do we tend to isolate ourselves from the Incarnation? How do you see this played out in today's world?
- When you read news stories about abuse perpetrated against children and youth, how to you respond?
- How does your congregation foster the health and well-being of the Next Generation? How many of the seven topics mentioned in this article have been engaged, in some way, by your congregation? How might your congregation do more?