



2013 BISHOP'S SERIES:  
THE ELCA AT 25



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**NORTHWESTERN MINNESOTA SYNOD**

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# January: A “New” Church

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*“From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way. **So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!** All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.”*

## **II Corinthians 5:16- 21**

In many of our communities there is intense, though short-lived, interest in the first baby born in a new year. Local hospitals even give prizes and gifts to the parents of the New Year Baby.

At exactly 12:01 a.m. (Central Standard Time) on January 1, 1988, in accord with the articles for merger, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) became the surviving corporation into which were merged the corporations of the American Lutheran Church (ALC), the Lutheran Church in America (LCA) and the Association of Evangelical Lutheran Churches (AELC).<sup>1</sup>

As we celebrate the 25th birthday of this “new year baby,” it’s an opportune time to reflect together on **what it has meant and what it still means** to be part of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. Hence, my 2013 Bishop’s Bible Studies will focus on key descriptors of our ELCA—adjectives that define us (or that we hope define us) within the whole Body of Christ. These descriptors also serve to define our congregations, the basic units of our ELCA—indispensable cells in the Body of Christ. So these Bible studies will be bi-focal in nature, illuminating our church body and its first quarter-century of life, but also shedding light on what’s happening in our congregations.

## More Than Another Merger

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We can describe the beginning of the ELCA in a variety of ways. In the second paragraph (above) there is a legal description of what happened in the first minute of January 1, 1988. Though

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<sup>1</sup> Lowell G. Almen, *One Great Cloud of Witnesses!* (1997, Augsburg Fortress, Minneapolis), p. 10. (Hereafter cited “Almen.”)

accurate, it uses a word that was studiously avoided in the years leading up to formation of the ELCA: “merger.”

The twentieth century was an era of many mergers of church bodies across North America. Edgar Trexler notes that between 1900 and 1999 twenty Lutheran church bodies in America moved toward unity in a series of mergers in 1918, 1930, 1960, 1962 and 1988.<sup>2</sup>

**“Merger” is a legal, corporate term.** Mergers happen when two or more organizations negotiate themselves out of existence in order to form a new, merged organization. Mergers tend to look to the past—focusing on preserving the best of what each predecessor organization brings to the negotiating table in order to shape a new organization that will achieve greater efficiency, productivity and growth.

In 1982 the national conventions of the ALC, LCA and AELC all approved actions that would lead to the formation of, not another merged church, but a new church. The die was cast when the three predecessor church bodies elected a total of 70 members to serve on a **Commission for a New Lutheran Church** (CNLC).

**What was so attractive about that word “new”?** Several possibilities come to mind...

- “New” didn’t sound as “corporate” as “merger.”
- “New” seemed to suggest looking forward rather than looking backward.
- “New” reflected the spirit of the times, when Americans were realizing how different the post-World War II world was compared to the world of the 19th and early 20th centuries.
- “New” carried more theological freight—connoting the newness that Jesus Christ is always bringing into our lives.

For all the reasons that made us desire formation of a *New Lutheran Church*, **that word “new” also posed some challenges.** As the first Secretary of the ELCA, Lowell Almen, notes: “All of the talk about a ‘new’ church raised concerns among some members in congregations of the uniting churches; it also fostered false expectations among others. To some a ‘new’ church implied casting aside everything that they had known and held precious in their Lutheran heritage and in their particular church body. To others, ‘new’ church suggested nothing was nailed down, everything was

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<sup>2</sup> Edgar R. Trexler, *High Expectations: Understanding the ELCA’s Early Years, 1988-2002*, p. 6. (Hereafter cited “Trexler.”)

up for negotiation, and anything would go—until the ‘new’ church decided for itself what teachings, standards, and commitments would apply in the ELCA.”<sup>3</sup>

Nervousness over the “new” Lutheran church was only compounded when, in 1988 and the first few years thereafter the ELCA confronted a host of difficulties—from trying to fill nearly 2300 staff positions at the new churchwide office in Chicago to responding to theological criticisms from several quarters to dealing with financial shortfalls to clarifying the ELCA’s understanding of ministry (a task that got pushed off until the 1993 ELCA churchwide assembly) to getting the ALC and LCA computer systems to “talk” to one another.<sup>4</sup>

**Despite these bumps in the road, the ELCA and its 65 synods slowly took shape.** And there was indeed much that was “new” in this young church body:

- A new churchwide office building in the city of Chicago;
- A majority of the 65 synod bishops who did not serve in similar roles in the ALC, LCA or AELC;
- A large majority of churchwide staff who did not hold similar positions in the predecessor churches;
- New approaches to funding ministries of the church;
- New patterns for governing and relating to the eight seminaries of the ELCA;
- Fresh attention to the gifts of laity, women and persons of color/primary language other than English;
- A new place in the religious landscape as the ELCA in 1988 claimed to be the fifth largest Christian church body in America.

Perhaps least affected by the creation of the ELCA in 1988 was the most basic “expression” of our church body: the congregation. As Almen observes, the 11,000 congregations of the ELCA “continued worship and ministry with little change....Few members—unless they had particular interest in church administration—noticed the changes that were taking place beyond each congregation.”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Almen, p. 15.

<sup>4</sup> Trexler addresses these and other early difficulties in “Chapter 1: The Pains of Newness,” pp. 14-34.

<sup>5</sup> Almen, p.11.

## Christ's Gift of Newness

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But precisely at this point we need to ask, “**So, what exactly was ‘new’ about the ELCA?**” And, for that matter, what is still “new” about our ongoing life in the ELCA, our synod, and our congregations? *What is the source of the “newness” that matters most?*

Pondering this question, I recalled a critical study by one of our church's revered teachers, Dr. Roy Harrisville (professor emeritus of New Testament at Luther Seminary). In 1955 Dr. Harrisville published a summary of his doctoral dissertation on the topic, “The Concept of Newness in the New Testament.”<sup>6</sup>

Dr. Harrisville began by exploring the two Greek words for “new” that appear in the New Testament (NT): **kainos** (kyn-US) and **neos** (NEH-us). Traditionally, scholars of ancient Greek literature and interpreters of the NT distinguished between these two words, observing that *neos* is mainly about **time**, i.e. the “youthfulness” of someone or something, whereas *kainos* is more about the **quality** of a person or thing. That is, something described as *kainos* supplants or makes obsolete older things or persons.

As he studied these two words and their intriguing histories, however, Dr. Harrisville concluded that they are used interchangeably in the NT. It takes more than a good Greek dictionary to get at the concept of newness in the NT!

What Harrisville discovered is that the proclaimed message of the NT is what defines the concept of newness in the NT. And at the heart of this message is the reality that “in Jesus something entirely new has occurred, that in him a new time phase, a ‘new aeon’ (a new age) has begun by which the redemptive activity of God comes to its conclusion.”<sup>7</sup> Jesus, not a Greek lexicon, defines what is “new” in the NT.

**As we delve into this radical understanding of newness, we notice four things:**

### *1. Contrast*

In the story of Jesus we see how God's old covenant with Israel contrasts with God's new covenant, enacted most visibly in the Lord's Supper. In Harrisville's words, “Jesus, by establishing the new

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<sup>6</sup> R.A. Harrisville, “The Concept of Newness in the New Testament,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* (Vol. 74, No. 2) pp. 69-79. (Hereafter cited “Harrisville.”)

<sup>7</sup> Harrisville, p. 73.

covenant, announced that the heavenly blessings which Israel believed God would pour out at the end of days were now mediated to his community through himself, i.e., in his death.”<sup>8</sup>

## 2. Continuity

Again, Harrisville: “The new covenant does not replace the old, but rather grows out of it and is related to it as fulfillment to promise....both have their origin in and are an expression of the same divine will.”<sup>9</sup>

## 3. Dynamism

Commenting on the unfolding of end-time events in the Book of Revelation, Harrisville contends that “the movement is...to be explained by the power of Jesus Christ, whose redemptive activity sets in motion the whole series of events....This ‘dynamic’ aspect of the concept of newness in the NT is perhaps its most specific and outstanding feature....The new asserts itself over against the old and actually crowds it out of existence. It is also revealed in the power of the new to perpetuate itself, in contrast to the old which is transitory.”<sup>10</sup>

## 4. Finality

“The renewal by faith is final,” declares Harrisville. “It cannot be repeated because the believer has been placed within that last and final period of God’s redemptive activity which hastens on to its goal. In Christ the ‘coming age’ has dawned, and with it its blessings and judgment.”<sup>11</sup>

## What’s New?

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**What is new about the ELCA, our synod and your congregation?** *It is the proclaimed message that is at the heart of our life and witness as ELCA members. Our ELCA Confession of Faith describes this message succinctly, faithfully and winsomely:*

This church confesses Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior and the Gospel as the power of God for the salvation of all who believe.

**The Constitutions, Bylaws, and Continuing Resolutions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Chapter Two.**

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<sup>8</sup> Harrisville, p. 73.

<sup>9</sup> Harrisville, p. 74.

<sup>10</sup> Harrisville, pp. 75-76.

<sup>11</sup> Harrisville, pp. 76-77.

For reflection and discussion:

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- Why are we attracted to persons or things that are described as “new?”
- How does the church (in your experience of it) seem both “old” and “new?”
- What intrigues you about the concept of newness in the New Testament, as described by Dr. Roy Harrisville? How is Jesus Christ making you and your church new?

## February: A “Diverse” Church

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And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God’s deeds of power.’ All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, ‘What does this mean?’

### **Acts 2:8-12**

Jesus loves the little children  
All the children of the world.  
Black and yellow, red and white,  
They’re all precious in His sight.  
Jesus loves the little children of the world.

**(author unknown)**

The Christian Church was born in Jerusalem on the Jewish festival of Pentecost in a crucible of amazing diversity. Jewish pilgrims “from every nation under heaven” (Acts 2:5) had streamed to Jerusalem for this holy day. When the Holy Spirit descended on the disciples, the Spirit’s powerful presence was evidenced as Christ’s followers proclaimed the **one** Gospel in a **diverse** array of global languages.

Church historian Robert Louis Wilken, in his recent book *The First Thousand Years: A Global History of Christianity* (Yale University Press, 2012), shows how in its first four centuries the Church carried the Gospel into virtually every part of the world as it was then known. He writes:

*“More than any other ancient Christian communion the Church of the East<sup>12</sup> made Christianity into a global religion... In the Latin West<sup>13</sup> the great mission to the north took place among the made Christianity into a global religion... In the Latin West the great mission to the north took place among the Germanic peoples... In the Greek-speaking East, missionaries went north among the Slavic peoples in the Balkans and in Russian and south to Nubia bordering Egypt and Ethiopian. But*

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<sup>12</sup> “The Church of the East” corresponds to what we call the Orthodox churches of today.

<sup>13</sup> “The Latin West” refers to Europe, where the Roman Catholic has been predominant.

*Syriac-speaking monks in the East had a more ambitious agenda, to carry the gospel [to]... China and India.” (p. 317)*

If you could take a snapshot of global Christianity—or even of global Lutheranism—the persons in the photo would represent all the races, ethnic groups and social strata on the planet. These would be wondrously colorful photographs!

But a similar snapshot of North American Lutheranism would appear to be almost monochromatic. Members of the ELCA are over 95% white of northern European descent, in a nation that is about 65% “non-Hispanic white”—and growing more racially and ethnically diverse by the day. By the year 2050 at least 50% of the U.S. population will be made up of Latinos, African Americans and Asian Americans.

## How did this happen?

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The racial and ethnic homogeneity of the ELCA reflects historical circumstances more than a calculated intention to shun diversity. Almost all of us North American Lutherans are descendants of immigrants from northern Europe who came to America seeking food, land, work and opportunity. “The exodus from Europe began in the 1600s with trickles of people leaving the old countries for the new land,” writes church historian Todd Nichol.<sup>14</sup> “By the 1800s the trickles had turned into rivers. They were still pouring into the United States during the first decades of the 20th century. For 300 years they came, until laws passed in the 1920s restricted immigration to a trickle again.”

Lutherans organized congregations and wider-church organizations (“synods”) uniting folks of similar ethnic and cultural backgrounds, almost all of them white. When the Lutheran churches of North America were growing it was primarily due to a combination of immigration and reproduction.

When the ELCA was formed in 1988 only 96,403 of its 5.2 million members were non-whites, about 1.85% of the new church’s membership. **But the architects of the ELCA knew that this would have to change for the Lutheran witness to remain strong across America.** So the newborn ELCA committed itself to an ambitious goal:

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<sup>14</sup> Todd W. Nichol, *All These Lutherans: Three Paths Toward a New Lutheran Church* (Augsburg, 1986), pp. 12-13.

that within 10 years of its establishment its membership shall include at least 10 percent people of color and/or primary language other than English.<sup>15</sup>

Other goals lifted up the place of laity, women and multi-cultural backgrounds in the organizational structure of the new church—the “representational principles” of

- having “at least 60 percent of the members of its assemblies, councils, committees, boards, and
- other organizational units...**be laypersons;**”
- having “as nearly as possible, 50 percent of the lay members of these assemblies, councils, committees, boards, or other organizational units...be female and 50 percent...be male;” and
- having “at least 10 percent of the members of these assemblies, councils, committees, boards, or other organizational units...**be persons of color and/or persons whose primary language is other than English.**”

## How’s that been working?

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How have we who are the ELCA done in achieving these goals? Some of the results have been disappointing. We have yet even to come close to reaching the 10% membership goal—with just under 5% of the current membership of the ELCA made up of people of color or language other than English. Only 1.57% of our members in the Northwestern Minnesota Synod are from non-white racial or ethnic groups.

The “representational principles” described above have been criticized as being too “politically correct” or as fostering a type of reverse-discrimination. I still remember the lament shared with me by a Latino ELCA pastor: *“Larry, just once I’d like to be asked to serve on an ELCA committee primarily because of my gifts and abilities—not just because I can fill ‘the Hispanic quota.’”*

We need to take seriously our inability thus far to achieve these goals, along with thoughtful critiques that have been offered. But the bigger picture is more complicated.

Perhaps the founding leaders of the ELCA simply under-estimated how long it takes to make the sort of massive “culture change” required for us to become a more diverse church. In the same vein, I

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<sup>15</sup> Continuing resolution 5.01.A87 in the [\*Constitution, Bylaws and Continuing Resolutions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America\*](#)

wonder if our founders took seriously enough the **significant demographic variations** across the regions of our country, e.g. Minnesota (and other states in the Midwest) has been and still is less racially and ethnically diverse than the USA as a whole—and rural areas in Minnesota are even less multi-culturally diverse (17 of the 21 counties in our synod have populations that are over 90% white). We have not always recognized the intimate connection between the **challenges of becoming a more diverse church** and the challenges of **becoming a more winsome evangelical church** (the topic of next month’s Bible study).

But good things have still happened. As Edgar Trexler notes, “in its first 15 years...(the increase in ethnic members in the ELCA occurred) largely through the welcoming of people of color by predominantly white congregations”<sup>16</sup> as opposed to increased membership in ethnic-specific congregations. Our church body has labored diligently to become a more welcoming church via leadership training, producing multicultural worship and music resources, offering anti-racism training, and planting new congregations in areas characterized by diverse racial and ethnic populations. Our organizational principles have had the effect of bring more laity, women and multi-cultural folks “to the table” of leadership in the ELCA.

Most of all, as we observe the ELCA’s 25th anniversary, let us recognize and reaffirm the intention of the diversity goals of our church body. The “*face*” of *America is changing!* The “*faces*” of Minnesota and the 21 counties of our synod are also changing. Faithfulness to the Great Commission (Matthew 28) to make disciples of “*all nations*” will continue to spur those of us who are “cradle Lutherans” to reach out to persons with whom we may not share the same racial, ethnic or cultural backgrounds.

## The path ahead

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If you have read this far, you might be thinking: “Oh this ‘diversity stuff’ may be an issue for folks in Fargo-Moorhead, the greater Grand Forks area and around Bemidji....but we live in an all-white rural area. We can’t embrace something that’s not already out there in our community or area.”

I believe that there isn’t one of our 242 congregations that cannot look squarely at the issue of diversity and respond in ways that are faithful, thoughtful, and imaginative. Here are a few ideas for you and your congregation:

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<sup>16</sup> Edgard R. Trexler, *High Expectations: Understanding the ELCA’s Early Years, 1988-2002*, (Minneapolis, Augsburg Fortress, 2003), p. 188.

### *1. Re-read the scriptures*

From Genesis to Revelation, God has a vision for drawing unto himself people of every race and nation. Engage one another in Bible studies or “dwelling in the Word” experiences on key passages like the call of Abraham and Sarah (Genesis 12:1-3), the global visions of Isaiah (some of which we just read in worship during the season of Epiphany, e.g. Isaiah 43:1-7), the visit of the Magi (Matthew 2:1-12), the many gospel stories of Jesus breaking boundaries between Jews and Gentiles, the story of Pentecost (Acts 2), Peter’s encounter with Cornelius (Acts 10), the “cosmic Christ” passages in Colossians (e.g. Colossians 1:15-20), and the amazing closing chapters of Revelation (Revelation 21-22). Pray these and other scriptures in your personal devotions and your congregation’s corporate worship.

### *2. Keep re-defining “our kind of people”*

If you find yourself speaking of “our kind of people,” ask yourself: just who is included in that? The consistent witness of the scriptures is that God keeps broadening and expanding the circle of who’s included as “our kind of people.” Or, even more simply, ask who’s included within “**God’s kind of people.**”

### *3. Question your assumptions*

Although northwestern Minnesota remains one of the “whitest” parts of our state, we are continually welcoming new neighbors of color or a primary language other than English. At January’s ELCA Bishops Academy, Dr. Daisy Machado of Union Theological Seminary pointed out that between the 2000 census and the 2010 census the region of the country that witnessed the *greatest percentage increase* in Latinos was the Midwest. Time and again, I am struck by how many non-white folks I see, encounter or visit with in even the tiniest towns of our synod.

### *4. Get to know your new neighbors*

Every trip I make to the Hornbachers grocery store in Moorhead is a multi-cultural experience, a time to encounter persons with stories and backgrounds far different from my own. So I go out of my way to smile at, greet warmly and (if I can) converse briefly with the checkout staff and others. Because many persons of color in our region are new immigrants to this country, God is bringing the world to our doorsteps.

### ***5. Get in touch with our “under the radar” racism***

I’m confident that none of us would openly identify ourselves as racists. We would all readily affirm God’s inclusive vision of people coming from “every tribe and language and people and nation” (Revelation 5:9). But racism often flies “under the radar” in our lives—revealing itself in our fleeting thoughts, our unintentional comments (“where did that come from?”), even the jokes we chuckle at before thinking. Consider offering an anti-racism learning experience or diversity training in your congregation or community. Pay attention to and get involved in the debate over immigration policy that will be before the U.S. Congress in the months to come.

### ***6. Listen to congregations and disciples who are making a difference***

Learn about, pray for, and support multi-cultural ministries in and around our synod, e.g. Peoples Church of Bemidji; Trinity of Pelican Rapids; the Division for Indian Work of the Episcopal Church in Minnesota. Dip into the rich wealth of resources available on the ELCA website. Pay attention especially to the “first third of life” folks in your faith communities—college students whose friendship circles include multi-cultural companions and high schoolers returning from mission trips to racially-diverse or ethnically-diverse parts of the world.

O God of all, with wonderful diversity of languages and cultures you created all people in your image. Free us from prejudice and fear that we may see your face in the faces of people around the world, through Jesus Christ our Savior and Lord. Amen.

**ELW, p. 79**

For reflection and discussion:

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- How do you respond to our Evangelical Lutheran Church in America’s stated goals on diversity? How important are these goals, compared to other priorities for our church? What have we done right? What could we do better?
- How often and where do you encounter persons who are different from you (racially, ethnically, culturally)? What signs of growing diversity of the population do you see in your town or local area?
- Which of the six suggestions under “The Path Ahead” (above) would you like to pursue in your congregation?

## March: An “Evangelical” Church

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For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die. But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us.

**Romans 5:6-8**

For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures...

**I Corinthians 15:3-4**

As I write this March Bible study, my wife Joy and I are anticipating with great eagerness the birth of our first grandchild. We already know some things about this little one: she’s a girl, she’ll make her appearance around June 1st, and we have good reason to believe she will be *gorgeous*! The only surprise still awaiting us is the name that our daughter and son-in-law will choose (or have already chosen) for her. “Mum’s the word” about that, at least for now.

Whenever a child is born, people are anxious to hear the **name**. Twenty-five years ago there was similar expectation regarding the proposed name for the church body that was being birthed by seventy members of the Commission for a New Lutheran Church (CNLC). As I recall a number of intriguing, even fanciful names were under consideration. But when the CNLC rolled out the “Evangelical Lutheran Church in America” surprise was expressed over that first word, “evangelical.” Why?

### Evangelical: A Surprising Adjective

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The adjective, from a Greek root word, was considered arcane by some. “Evangelical” wasn’t in the names of the two largest predecessor church bodies—the ALC and the LCA—though the third, much smaller predecessor church was called the Association of Evangelical Lutheran Churches (AELC). Some feared that by including “*evangelical*” in our name, we might get confused with proponents of American *evangelicalism*, a strain within conservative Protestants known for their

emphasis on “born again” conversion experiences, a legalistic (some said “fundamentalistic”) approach to interpreting Scripture, and the politics of the “Religious Right.”

In the end, though, the reasons for including “evangelical” won out. Some of those reasons included:

- “Evangelical’s” strong historical roots among Lutherans across the globe. Martin Luther “thought such a name pointed to the proclamation of the gospel ‘as the source of the church’s life and the living, powerful, creative force through which people are called to faith and sustained in the communion of saints.’”<sup>17</sup>
- Of the 254 Lutheran church bodies in the world, 149 of them used “evangelical” in their name.
- Our nearest North American Lutheran neighbors, who merged in 1986, had chosen the name *Evangelical* Lutheran Church in Canada.

## Evangelical: Meaning and Mission

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At a deeper level, “evangelical” carried a **profound meaning and an exciting mission**. Evangelical comes from the Greek word, *evangelion*, which means “**glad tidings**.” The “E” in ELCA expresses the hope that our church will always be marked by a passion for the glad tidings of God’s undeserved grace and favor in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

“Evangelical” implies a stance. We understand ourselves and all people to be sinners—curved in upon ourselves and thus thoroughly alienated from God, from God’s good creation and from one another. **We are hopelessly lost.**

But “while we were still sinners” God sought us out in our lostness, entered into that lostness, and daringly rescued us in Christ. All of this has happened and continues happening **not because we are deserving, but because God is gratuitously good**. God’s embracing, transforming love keeps finding us in our lostness and transforming us into new creatures.

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<sup>17</sup> Lowell G. Almen, *One Great Cloud of Witnesses* (Augsburg Fortress, 1997), p. 17

This is the good news on which we are willing to stake our lives. Our ELCA Confession of Faith boldly proclaims “Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior and the Gospel as the power of God for the salvation of all who believe.”<sup>18</sup>

In contrast to so much of American “evangelicalism,” the Lutheran witness has a distinctly good-news orientation. We do not define ourselves by how we experience the gospel, the morality that we uphold, or our particular approach to interpreting the Bible. We are defined by what God has done, is doing and will continue to do for us—saving us (without our help), forgiving us (despite our sin), and freeing us (in the face of our mortality) all for Jesus’ sake.

But “evangelical” doesn’t just describe a stance or a stand that we take as Lutherans. “Evangelical” also sends us out to serve God’s mission of claiming the world and renewing all things for the sake of Christ’s life, death and resurrection. “Evangelical” both carries meaning and conveys mission. **We don’t simply hold fast to the Good News.** We move out as instruments whereby **God gives away the Good News.**

My colleague Pastor Keith Zeh, our ELCA Director for Evangelical Mission (DEM, shared with the Eastern North Dakota Synod), loves having “evangelical” in our church’s name *“because it keeps before us our baptismal covenant ‘to proclaim the good news of God in Christ through word and deed.’ ‘Evangelical’ also points to our God who is on a mission to redeem and bless the world, even as he invites church to be engaged in this mission.”*

## Evangelical: Our Response

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So how have we done since 1988 in faithfully serving this evangelical mission of God? If evangelical vibrancy as a church body correlates in any meaningful way with church membership numbers, what do ELCA statistics tell us?

The raw numbers seem stark, at first. When the ELCA came into existence on January 1, 1988 we had 5.2 million baptized members in about 11,000 congregations. Today we have about 4.2 million members in just under 10,000 congregations. Some have contended that this membership decline is the result of our church being overly-focused on divisive issues, to the neglect of sharing Christ with

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<sup>18</sup> Provision 2.02 in the Constitution, Bylaws and Continuing Resolutions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. The same language is found in our synodical and congregational constitutions.

our neighbors. Critics have been quick to suggest that we've lost members and congregations because we've not lived up to our claim to be "evangelical."

Such critiques should be taken seriously. But the statistics and assumptions on which such criticisms are based also need to be interpreted with attention to mitigating factors, such as:

- When the ELCA was founded its congregations tended to be most concentrated in parts of the U.S. that have experienced stagnation or decline in population since 1988—not population growth;
- The fact that ELCA Lutherans have tended to be, on average, 15 or more years older than the average age of all U.S. citizens; and
- The fact that our ELCA's membership woes need to be viewed against the backdrop of long-term church membership decline in all other historic Protestant church bodies and—more recently—even within American church bodies with a reputation for evangelical fervor

Still, as we celebrate the 25th anniversary of our ELCA, we will be wise to ponder prayerfully our faithfulness in "handing on" the Good News of Jesus which is always "of first importance" (1 Cor. 15:3-4). Have we been as imaginative and willing to take risks in giving God's gracious Word "free course" among us?

*"We tend to be overly cautious about not being lumped in with other faith communities engaged in doing evangelical outreach that, in certain ways, are under-girded by theologies that are either offensive or disturbing to us,"* observes Pastor Zeh. *"It sometimes seems that we are satisfied with simply avoiding these unseemly evangelical outreach practices and principles without spending the energy and imagination to articulate, claim and act upon our understanding of what it means for us to be Evangelical Lutherans in America."*

## Evangelical: God's Gift

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In the end, God and God alone is responsible for everyone who hears the Good News and responds in faith. Again, Pastor Zeh puts it well:

***"Evangelism is not our doing but is the work of the Holy Spirit. Luther wrote in his Small Catechism, 'I believe that by my own understanding or strength I cannot believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to him, but instead the Holy Spirit has called me through the gospel, enlightened me***

*with his gifts, made me holy and kept me in true faith.’ When it comes to evangelism, no amount of studying, strategizing, planning or calculating will bear fruit if the Holy Spirit is not present. **When the Spirit goes before us** we need not be anxious or manipulative in our evangelical outreach. An evangelizing church hears the gospel and responds to this good news in service of our neighbors in both word and deed. Our Lord’s Great Commandment and Great Commission go hand in hand.”*

As we celebrate how God is always making us new, 25 years after the founding of the ELCA, we will also give thanks for the ways God has used and will continue to use us in giving voice to the Gospel. Our ELCA *“has embraced and engaged in the vitally important work of planting new congregations and renewing established congregations,”* Pastor Zeh reminds us.

*“Let us not forget that over the past 25 years our Evangelical Lutheran Church in America has started over 430 congregations and accompanied, encouraged and equipped thousands of other congregations in turning outward from themselves toward their neighbors.”*

For reflection and discussion:

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- How have you experienced the “glad tidings” of Jesus Christ?
- How does your congregation “give away” the Good News?
- What is one risk you (or your congregation) could take to draw others into the orbit of God’s grace in Christ?

## April: A Church of the Word

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Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

### **John 20:30-31**

When I need to take a break from my work, I dive into a novel. What a great escape—to leave real life temporarily and become lost in the narrative of another world, another time, another cast of characters. The latest novel I read was<sup>19</sup> by Herman Wouk, the Pulitzer-Prize-winning author of books like *The Caine Mutiny* (1951) and *The Winds of War* (1971, later made into a TV mini-series). Wouk, a devout Jew, is still writing novels at the ripe old age of 97!

*The Lawgiver* narrates the making of a new epic movie about the Old Testament hero, Moses. The novel focuses on Margo Solovei, a young woman tasked with writing the movie's screenplay. Margo, the daughter of a rabbi, grew up in a religiously observant home—but has abandoned her Jewish faith. As she grinds away at writing her screenplay about Moses, however, it becomes apparent that the faith has not abandoned her. The pages of the scriptures still live—vividly, compellingly—in her memory. God's Word has gotten its teeth into Margo's complex, post-modern life.

This is nothing new or startling. Over the years I've met a number of persons who've tried to be unbelievers—except that the Word of God had laid claim to them, sometimes quite unexpectedly. During my brief time as Director of Admissions at Luther Seminary, I remember meeting

- a prospective student who in his unbelieving college years, was recaptured by the Word of God as he participated in the choir of an ELCA college, singing sacred music; and
- another man who recounted living apart from the Christian community, but in his work as a *professional calligrapher*—often creating plaques featuring Bible verses—the Word called him back to a life of faith.

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<sup>19</sup> Herman Wouk, *The Lawgiver* (Simon and Schuster, 2012).

God’s Word, you see, is always more than a piece of information in a book. It is alive. It carries power. It exerts force in our lives. **The Word “has a life of its own”**—a life that is always seeking to draw us into its orbit.

One of the best-kept secrets of our Evangelical Lutheran Church in America is the profound statement about the Word of God that is woven into our *ELCA Confession of Faith*. We ELCA members treasure an understanding of the Word of God that is unique and compelling—indeed, it’s a contribution we offer to the whole church on earth. Central to this understanding is our insistence that the phrase “Word of God” always carries a threefold meaning.

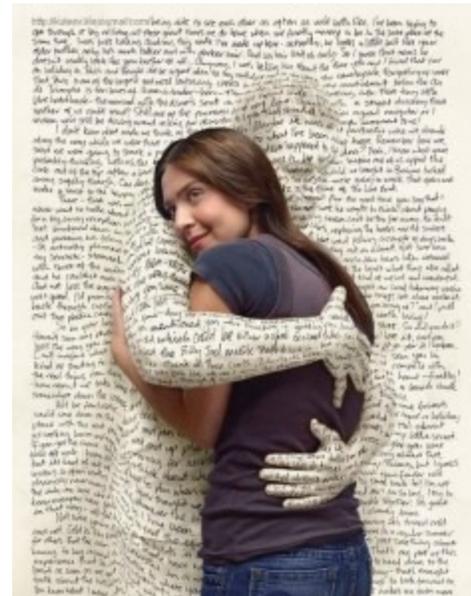
## Word as Person

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First and foremost, the Word of God is **not a thing or an idea but a person**: *“Jesus Christ is the Word of God incarnate, through whom everything was made and through whose life, death, and resurrection God fashions a new creation.”*<sup>20</sup>

So when we speak of the Word of God, we don’t first think of a book. **We imagine Jesus**, the *“Word (who) became flesh and lived among us... full of grace and truth.”* (John 1:14)

Jesus’s is God’s best “love letter” to us—a living, breathing message from God. Indeed, in Jesus God became the Message. In Jesus, the Word of God took on a human face, walked alongside us, suffered, died, was buried and rose again for us.



In Jesus we receive our most vivid experience of how the Word of God is always more than information about God—information we can take or leave, as suits our fancy. In Jesus God has intruded on “our” territory—God is expressed to us in a way that’s unique, unmistakable and undeniable.

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<sup>20</sup> See provision C2.02.a in the [Model Constitution for Congregations of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America](#).

All of this has just come home to us in another Lent, Holy Week and Easter. If sin is our huge “No” to God, Jesus is God’s even bigger “Yes” to us. This is the Word of God that is regularly lifted up, articulated, and proclaimed all across our Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

## Word as Event

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Second, the Word of God is a **present and continuing event in our lives**, when the Word is proclaimed in such a way that we find ourselves believing it—willing to stake our lives on it. *“The proclamation of God’s message to us as both Law and Gospel is the Word of God, revealing judgment and mercy through word and deed, beginning with the Word in creation, continuing in the history of Israel, and centering in all its fullness in the person and work of Jesus Christ.”*<sup>21</sup>

Although it’s most natural for us to think specifically of the Sunday sermon as our most regular experience of such proclamation, in truth we are coming within earshot of the proclaimed Word all the time. The event of God’s Word happens in spiritual songs, searching conversations, moving works of art, great storytelling and a host of other ways.

What lets us know we’ve been on the receiving end of such proclamation is that God’s Word comes alive for us once again. As hard as we might try to keep God at arm’s length, we discover ourselves stammering (with Thomas): *“My Lord and my God!”* (John 20:28 which we’ll hear again in worship on April 7th). This almost-sacramental understanding and experience of the proclaimed Word is one of our hallmarks in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. Let us celebrate this as we give thanks to God for our 25 years of life and *proclamation* in the ELCA.

## Word as Book

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The first two ways of understand the Word of God—as person and event—inform the third way: *“The canonical Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments are the written Word of God. Inspired by God’s Spirit speaking through their authors, they record and announce God’s revelation centering in Jesus Christ. Through them God’s Spirit speaks to us to create and sustain Christian faith and fellowship for service in the world.”*<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> See provision C2.02.b in the [Model Constitution for Congregations of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America](#).

<sup>22</sup> See provision C2.02.c in the [Model Constitution for Congregations of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America](#).

There is a crucial priority here that we dare not miss. It has to do with the authority of the Bible, which is for us Lutherans always a derived authority, i.e. **the authority of the Bible flows directly from the ways this book reveals Jesus and empowers proclamation.**

Keeping this straight helps us respect the Bible without turning the Bible into an object of worship. We honor and trust the Bible—not so much as a perfect rulebook or a flawless blueprint—but because by means of this book God creates saving faith.

In this regard the “coda” that the evangelist offers at the end of John 20 is instructive: *“Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book.”* In other words, the Bible doesn’t tell us everything that Jesus did, nor does it answer every question we might have. But *the Bible does tell us enough*—enough for God to use the testimony of scripture to create saving faith in us: *“But **these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.**”*

We in the ELCA believe that the Bible is a tough old book that will stand up to all our questions, explorations, and faithful attempts to interpret it or apply it for each new age and each fresh challenge or opportunity. If there is anything I lament about how we actually make use of the Bible as God’s written Word, it is not that we don’t take the Bible seriously enough—but that all too often we take it so seriously that we avoid “jumping into it” with both feet.

## Church of the Word

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As we celebrate this 25th Anniversary of our ELCA as a “Church of the Word,” let us set aside significant time for “dwelling in the Word” continually—in our daily devotions, during every worship service, at the start of every meeting of councils, boards, tables, and teams. Let us continue to be a Book of Faith church that believes we will encounter Jesus every time we hear God’s Word proclaimed and every time we crack open the written Word of the scriptures.

Almighty God, grant to your Church your Holy Spirit and the wisdom which comes down from heaven, that your Word may not be bound but have free course and be preached to the joy and edifying of Christ’s holy people, that in steadfast faith we may serve you and in the confession of your name may abide

to the end; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

**LBW, p. 153**

For reflection and discussion:

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- Why isn't telling the Word enough? Why did God become the Word, in Jesus?
- Describe your earliest memory of being so touched by a proclamation of God's Word that you found yourself saying: "Yes, I believe this!"
- Some people shy away from studying the Bible because they think they don't know enough about the Bible. How might we encourage one another—encourage everyone—to not be afraid to spend time dwelling in God's Word?

## May: An Interdependent Church

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The congregations, synods, and churchwide organization of this church are interdependent partners sharing responsibly in God's mission. In an interdependent relationship primary responsibility for particular functions will vary between the partners...

### **Constitution, Bylaws and Continuing Resolutions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Chapter 5.01.c.**

*After this the Lord appointed seventy others and sent them on ahead of him in pairs to every town and place where he himself intended to go. He said to them, 'The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest. Go on your way. See, I am sending you out like lambs into the midst of wolves. Carry no purse, no bag, no sandals; and greet no one on the road. Whatever house you enter, first say, "Peace to this house!" And if anyone is there who shares in peace, your peace will rest on that person; but if not, it will return to you. Remain in the same house, eating and drinking whatever they provide, for the laborer deserves to be paid. Do not move about from house to house. Whenever you enter a town and its people welcome you, eat what is set before you; cure the sick who are there, and say to them, "The kingdom of God has come near to you." But whenever you enter a town and they do not welcome you, go out into its streets and say, "Even the dust of your town that clings to our feet, we wipe off in protest against you. Yet know this: the kingdom of God has come near."*

### **Luke 10:1-10**

This familiar story from Luke 10 (which will pop up in our lectionary on July 7) is about going out into God's mission field, proclaiming God's rule over all things in Christ, and doing so with haste and urgency. The 70 apostles are to travel light, not get bogged down with "stuff," and keep on the move. The reason Jesus can send out his disciples in such focused, Spartan fashion is that he's counting on them running into allies along the way (v. 7). There may be wolves out there in the mission field—but there are also other lambs out there. Jesus' representatives can "pack light" because he's assuming that others will help them, supply their wants, and look after their needs.

## Inherently Communal

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Mission in Jesus' name is always a group endeavor. Discipleship is inherently communal. It's a "we" thing, not a "me" thing. When we forget that, our effectiveness in serving God's mission is imperiled.

One of the late great teachers at Luther Seminary in St Paul liked to say, “*There are no Robinson Crusoe Christians.*” In my judgment, this means there is also no such thing as an autonomous congregation. In the Upper Midwest, “them’s are fightin’ words.”

One of the great Lutheran predecessor church bodies that used to have a strong presence on the territory of our synod proclaimed that “the congregation is the right form of the Kingdom of God on earth.” There is a strong element of truth in that statement—congregations are the basic, core “cells” in the Body of Christ on earth! But such statements also tend to foster the mistaken notion that a congregation can be independent or totally “free” or autonomous. That, according to the Bible, the Lutheran Confessions and the lived experience of Christians down through the ages and all across this globe, is *patently false*.

The Body of Christ, the universal church of our Lord Jesus, has **exactly zero “autonomous” congregations**. And that’s because bringing Christ’s love to the world, proclaiming God’s surprising and gentle Rule over all things, serving God’s global rescue mission—it’s all an inherently you-and-metoegether business. We are always trading places as senders and receivers, proclaimers and hearers of the Gospel.

**When we move through the New Testament**, especially in the Book of Acts and the epistles of St Paul, we behold a whole bunch of fledgling congregations yoked together, networked with one another, all across the Mediterranean world, led by all sorts of Spirit-driven ministers, bound to one another for witness and service and mission in Jesus’ name. When we poke around in congregational histories here in the upper Midwest, we’re struck by how often our Lutheran congregations began as circuits of preaching points, collections of faith-communities that shared a pastor and engaged all the people of God in doing the work of ministry.

**As we experience the global church of today**—for instance, our companion synod, the Andhra Evangelical Lutheran Church in India—we see scads of multi-point parishes, sprawling collections of lively mission outposts, sharing clergy, calling forth laity and other leaders, doing most of God’s work “in formation” with others.

## Interdependence: Hard-Wired Into Our DNA

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For all these reasons—and then some—interdependence is hard-wired into our DNA in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. Congregations, conferences, synods, regions, the churchwide organization and our global mission partners all rely on one another. **Together we**

**create, nurture and sustain life-giving webs** of education institutions, social service agencies, outdoor ministries, campus ministries and other cooperative endeavors—with each entity contributing to but also dependent upon all the others.

**How do you experience this interdependence within our church?** How does your congregation both give and receive from other congregations, from non-parish ministry organizations, from our synod, from our entire churchwide organization? Consider some snapshots of interdependence “on the ground” in northwestern Minnesota:

- A group of pastors and lay ministers gathers weekly to study the scriptures, prepare for next Sunday’s sermon and encourage one another in service.
- Perceiving the presence of new opportunities to do evangelical witness, one of the synod’s conferences secures an ELCA outreach grant and calls a mission developer to equip disciples in congregations for sharing the love of Christ.
- Neighboring congregations and ministers “close ranks” to help out a congregation whose pastor goes on a medical leave of absence.
- Two or more congregations sponsor an “Area Conversation,” inviting other congregations to explore sharing pastors or cooperating in other ministries.
- Several STaR (small town and rural) congregations decide to join forces in doing confirmation or youth ministry together rather than individually.
- A congregation reorders its own priorities to allow it to share staff and active church members with a synodically-authorized ministry, a new community of faith under development.
- 241 congregations band together to support one another, call forth and equip pastors and other rostered leaders, and pool their financial resources to do together what none of those congregations could do on its own (this is simply one way of describing our Northwestern Minnesota Synod—a prime example of interdependence in our ELCA).

**None of these “snapshots” are photo-shopped. They are real, happening in our synod and across our ELCA, right now.** I could easily describe a host of other examples of such actual, on-the-ground interdependence.

## Not Obsolete!

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We live in a time when interdependence is not always prized as it once was. So many of us live atomized lives in which we seem to be focused more on the screens of our digital devices than on the faces of the real human beings all around us. Institutional loyalty is in decline. Religious denominations are supposedly dying, if not dead already. **But interdependence as a sheer fact of our existence has not become obsolete.** God has created us to be social beings, fashioned for relationships with one another. And the kind of interdependence envisioned in rich New Testament images such as the “Vine-and-branches” or the “Body of Christ” has yet to outlive its power and potential in our lives.

As we live into the next 25 years in our Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, let us recommit ourselves to living and working together interdependently, always remembering that

- Mission in Christ’s name is an inherently communal endeavor;
- Just as there are no Robinson Crusoe Christians nor autonomous congregations; and
- Congregations—the basic “cells” in the Body of Christ on earth—see themselves as deeply interdependent circles of disciples, joined at the hip with other congregations and expressions of our common life in the ELCA.

## For reflection and discussion:

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- How did your congregation come into existence? Which other parts of the Body of Christ helped in the founding of your congregation?
- Right now, what are some ways your congregation is both receiving from and giving to other parts of the Body of Christ?
- How might your congregation tackle a challenge or address an opportunity better if you worked with another congregation or ministry organization?

## June: A Global Church

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During the night Paul had a vision: there stood a man of Macedonia pleading with him and saying, 'Come over to Macedonia and help us.' When he had seen the vision, we immediately tried to cross over to Macedonia, being convinced that God had called us to proclaim the good news to them.

### **Acts 16:9-10**

"The Church is a people created by God in Christ, empowered by the Holy Spirit, called and sent to bear witness to God's creative, redeeming, and sanctifying activity in the world. To participate in God's mission, this church shall:

- **Proclaim God's saving Gospel** of justification by grace for Christ's sake through faith alone, according to the apostolic witness in the Holy Scripture, preserving and transmitting the Gospel faithfully to future generations.
- **Carry out Christ's Great Commission** by reaching out to all people to bring them to faith in Christ and by doing all ministry with a global awareness consistent with the understanding of God as Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier of all.
- **Serve in response to God's love** to meet human needs, caring for the sick and the aged, advocating dignity and justice for all people, working for peace and reconciliation among the nations, and standing with the poor and powerless and committing itself to their needs."

*(emphasis added, from Chapter 4 of the Constitution, Bylaws and Continuing Resolutions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America)*

It is so very easy to lead our lives by scarcely ever looking beyond the ends of our noses. We hunker down and focus on what's right ahead of us in our tiny corner of the world. But when we enter intentionally into the life of Christ's church—when we walk into our church building, we step into a much wider world. Every time that happens we are reminded (if we're paying attention) that our **Evangelical Lutheran Church in America is an amazingly *global* church.**

Think about an ordinary Sunday morning in your congregation. It would not be unusual for you to notice...

- Quilts ready to be blessed and shipped to one of the 35 developing countries served by Lutheran World Relief, to provide shelter and warmth for needy folks;
- A letter from an ELCA global missionary your congregation helps sponsor;
- A report from fellow church members on their most recent global mission trip;
- A hymn from the global church or a prayer petition from Christians who live half a world away; or
- A chance to give a special offering for combatting malaria in Africa or providing farm animals to rural residents in Latin America or supporting international students at ELCA seminaries.

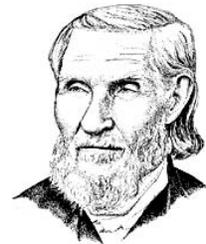


And those things could be apparent on an ordinary Sunday—not to mention those special occasions (such as “mission festivals” during the season of Epiphany) when your congregation is purposefully lifting up the global missions of our ELCA.

## Standing on the Shoulders of Giants

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Such awareness of the global reach of the gospel is nothing new for North American Lutherans. All our global mission connections have deep roots in our church’s history—especially in the activities of the Lutheran missionary societies of the 18th and 19th centuries that enabled our Lutheran forebears to help take the Good News of Jesus Christ to every corner of the world. It has been observed, however, that Martin Luther (1483-1546) essentially ignored the question of global missions. Living on the cusp of the great era of global exploration and discovery (remember: Luther was just 9 years old when Christopher Columbus set sail in 1492), the Great Reformer inhabited a much smaller, bounded world. Perhaps as a result of Luther’s own “blind spot” in this regard, the Lutheran Confessions of the 16th century “make no statement whatever about mission theology or practice.”<sup>23</sup>



*Rev. John Christian  
Frederick Heyer*

Over time, though, Lutherans discovered and developed a passion for evangelical witness “to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8). Hearing the same Macedonian call—“come over and help us”—that

<sup>23</sup> James A. Scherer, *Gospel, Church and Kingdom* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1987) p. 53

Paul heard in Acts 16, our Lutheran forebears acted on a missionary impulse that was implicit, if not explicit, in Martin Luther's teachings and ministry.

Today we in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America stand on the shoulders of giants like the Rev. John Christian Frederick Heyer (1793-1873) who earned a medical degree, served congregations in Pennsylvania and Minnesota, and later made three missionary journeys to India where he helped found our companion synod, the Andhra Evangelical Lutheran Church.

## Best Kept Secret

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One of the best kept secrets in our Evangelical Lutheran Church in America is the companion synod program which was begun in the first ten years of the ELCA's existence. "Sixty-five ELCA synods and five ELCIC synods participate in over 120 international companionships. These extend the bilateral relationships between our churches and Lutheran church bodies in other countries, called companions. The Companion Synod Program is a concrete

expression of the communion fellowship among the 140 member churches of the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) and an exciting way ELCA members can engage in global mission!"<sup>24</sup>

The genius of the companion synod program is the way it "puts a face" on global mission connections. Nowadays people of faith crave concreteness in their connections with other Christians. Christ calls us to care for all people of the world—but that's more than any of us can wrap our arms around. The companion synod program personalizes our synod's global mission connections, allowing us to develop a deeper relationship with *one* global Lutheran church body—even as we pray for and contribute financial gifts toward *all* of the global outreach efforts of our ELCA.

The companion synod program also recognizes the wondrous work of the Holy Spirit in establishing now-mature Christian churches on every continent. We American Lutherans have the high privilege

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<sup>24</sup> [ELCA Companion Synod Program](#)

of honoring these fellow believers as companions in Christ, called to a journey of accompaniment of one another as we serve God's mission in the world. You and your congregation can join hands with our sisters and brothers in the Andhra Evangelical Lutheran Church in a number of ways such as

- Praying for one another using the Companion Synod Prayers published in our synod's Northern Lights e-letter;
- Learning about the AELC by inviting one of the nineteen travelers who went from our synod to the AELC in November 2012 to speak in your congregation;
- Giving financial support for the Bible Women of the AELC who pray, teach and support Hindu women who are considering the claims of Jesus Christ.

We trust that our companion synod relationship with the AELC will continue to expand in the coming years, putting a "face" on global mission in all of our synod's congregations.

## Global + Local = Glocal

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One last thought. Traveling around our synod I'm struck by two patterns I observe. First, there are congregations that clearly cultivate their connections with global Christians. They lift up global missions constantly. They sponsor an ELCA global missionary. They conduct one or more global mission events every year.

Second, there are congregations that seem a little stand-offish about global mission. "We have plenty of mission work to do right in our own back yards," someone will say. But I always wonder: so, what exactly are you doing in your own backyard? And why do you think that serving God's mission involves a choice between either "local" or "global?"

The lines between "global" and "local" are increasingly blurred in the 21st century. Digital technology has shrunk the globe in all sorts of ways (e.g. I have over 20 Facebook friends who live outside the USA). Immigrants from around the globe continue to make their way to America. Things that happen many time zones away from Minnesota can have an immediate impact upon us.

"Glocal" is a new term used to describe God's work where global and local realities connect.

"Every day, in the food we eat, the clothes we wear and the cars we drive, we are having glocal experiences. [ELCA Glocal Mission Gatherings] help you make sense of these connections and

experience them within the context of your faith....You learn about the changing context of the global church."<sup>25</sup>

*Let us pray:*

Draw your church together, O God, into one great company of disciples, together following our teacher Jesus Christ into every walk of life, together serving in Christ's mission to the world, and together witnessing to your love wherever you will send us; for the sake of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

**Evangelical Lutheran Worship, p. 75**

For reflection and discussion:

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- How do you experience entering a wider world when you go to church?
- What's your earliest memory of encountering a global missionary or some other representative of the global church? What impact did this have on you?
- What is one step you'd like your congregation to take in order to cultivate a wider awareness of and engagement in the global church?

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<sup>25</sup> [Going Global from womenoftheelca.org](http://womenoftheelca.org)

## July: An Ecumenical Church

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There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.

### **Ephesians 4:4-6**

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) seeks in its faith and life “to manifest the unity given to the people of God by living together in the love of Christ and by joining with other Christians in prayer and action to express and preserve the unity which the Spirit gives.”

### **ELCA Constitution 4.02.f.**

Our Lord Jesus Christ has exactly one church. Whenever we confess the Nicene Creed in worship we say as much, loudly and clearly: “We believe in one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church.”

But facts on the ground point to a different reality. Because of differences of opinion, differences in interpretation of the scriptures, cultural differences, political and historical realities—and human sinfulness, there are thousands of Christian churches. By one estimate there are some 41,000 Christian denominations across the globe! So many ways of belonging to the one church of Jesus Christ!

We members of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, throughout the quarter century of our existence, have carved out a unique place within all these “brands” of being Christian. We have sought and continue to seek out **relationships of full communion** with other Christian groups—not so much to achieve unity, as to manifest the unity that is always God’s gift to us.

## Our Bias for Ecumenical Engagement

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What is it about us Lutherans that drives us toward ecumenical engagement with other Christians? First, **we listen carefully to Jesus** when he fervently prays that his followers may be one: *“I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely*

one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.” (John 17:20-23).

Second, we take seriously the intimate **connection between the unity of the church and the mission of the church** to make Christ known in the world. Martin Marty tells this compelling story: In 1935 “Dr. Ambedkar, leader of the untouchables in India, had denounced the caste system. He had called upon his sixty million fellow untouchables to renounce Hinduism with him, to find another religion. Many of them were drawn to accept Jesus Christ as the Way, the Truth, and the Life, but ‘when Christianity is mentioned, they remind me of the many divisions within the Christian Church. We are united in Hinduism, say they, and we shall become divided in Christianity’.”<sup>26</sup>

Third, in our **foundational confessional documents** we Lutherans commit ourselves to “traveling lightly” in terms of the basis we need to express with other Christians the unity that is God’s gift to us. In the Augsburg Confession of 1530 the Lutheran reformers laid out the following blueprint for ecumenical relationships with other Christians: “And to the true unity of the Church it is enough to agree concerning the doctrine of the Gospel and the administration of the Sacraments.” (Article VII)

## The Fruits of Full Communion

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If indeed we Lutherans are able to join hands in worship, witness and work with other Christians on the basis of the Word and the Sacraments—the field is wide open for building ecumenical partnerships that serve God’s mission in the world. Thus, over the 25 years of the ELCA’s life, our church body has reached out and recognized as full communion partners six historic Protestant denominations in the USA:

- The Presbyterian Church (USA)—1997
- The United Church of Christ—1997
- The Reformed Church in America—1997
- The Moravian Church—1999
- The Episcopal Church—1999
- The United Methodist Church—2009

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<sup>26</sup> Martin E. Marty, *A Short History of Christianity*, Revised Edition (Fortress, 1987), p. 301.

**What does it mean to be in “full communion,”** though? “For the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the characteristics of full communion are theological and missiological implications of the Gospel that allow variety and flexibility. These characteristics stress that the church act ecumenically for the sake of the world, not for itself alone. They will include at least the following, some of which exist at earlier stages:

1. a common confessing of the Christian faith;
2. a mutual recognition of Baptism and a sharing of the Lord’s Supper, allowing for joint worship and an exchangeability of members;
3. a mutual recognition and availability of ordained ministers to the service of all members of churches in full communion, subject to the disciplinary regulations of other churches;
4. a common commitment to evangelism, witness, and service;
5. a means of common decision making on critical common issues of faith and life;
6. a mutual lifting of any condemnations that exist between churches.”<sup>27</sup>

## The Price Tag of Pursuing Unity

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The foregoing brief sketch of our ELCA’s overtures toward other American church bodies could give the impression that working toward full communion agreements has been a piece of cake. Far from it! Looking back over the ELCA’s first 25 years, some of our sharpest disagreements have erupted precisely over efforts to live more deeply into God’s gift of unity. Voices in our midst have wondered whether we truly do share a common proclamation of the Word and celebration of the Sacraments with all of our ecumenical partners. Critics have contended that we have been too quick to sacrifice core Lutheran convictions for the sake of closer ties with other Christians. Fears about being reduced to a “lowest common denominator” form of faith have been expressed.

True confession: over the last quarter-century I myself, at times, harbored and voiced many of these same concerns about the ecumenical priorities of our ELCA. And a glance at the 25th Anniversary Booklet for our synod reveals that folks in northwestern Minnesota debated ecumenical issues rather hotly during several synod assemblies!

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<sup>27</sup> [Full Communion Partners](#) from [elca.org](#)

But now, in 2013, it's time to ask ourselves: **how many of the “awful awfuls”—the fears we had about losing the things that make us Lutheran—have actually come to pass?** My own conclusion (and please, dear friends, this is only my opinion) is that many of our ecumenical kerfuffles<sup>28</sup> since 1988 turned out to be tempests-in-teapots. I honestly wish I had spent more time and energy imagining the possibilities that might come from closer kinship with other Christians—especially as we move deeper into an era that gives less emphasis to denominational labels and is less focused on sectarian squabbles.

## Grassroots Ecumenism

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Some of the best “fruit” of our ecumenical endeavors in the ELCA is most visible on the local level—at the grassroots. Think, for a moment, about all the ways you and your congregation join hands with others who bear the name of Christ:

- Ministerial associations continue to draw Christians together in most of our communities;
- Pastors' text study groups regularly attract ecumenical partners to engage the Scriptures together;
- Community worship services happen regularly around certain holidays, in times of crisis, and during the Week of Prayer for Christianity Unity;
- Food shelves, homeless shelters, and other charitable organizations often are spearheaded by local churches working together;
- Joint released-time classes and VBS opportunities thrive in several of our towns;
- Natural disasters provide opportunities and incentives to reach across ecumenical boundaries.

As we ponder the future of our always-being-made-new-synod, I believe that we will find ourselves becoming ever more intentional about collaborating with ecumenical partner churches as we do God's work with our hands. Already in our synod there is a joint Lutheran-Presbyterian parish (Dalton/Ashby); a couple of Episcopal congregations served part-time by ELCA pastors who mentor “Total Ministry” teams in those parishes; an ELCA congregation served by a UCC pastor; a Native American Christian Ministry in the Fargo-Moorhead area that involves Lutheran-Methodist collaboration; and several communities where pastors of full communion partner churches find some

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<sup>28</sup> A word common in Great Britain, meaning “disturbance” or “fuss.”

of their best support and collaboration among ELCA pastors in this “Lutheran-dense” part of the country.

As I approach the seventh decade of my life, I believe that we ELCA members must continue offering our best gifts to our fellow-Christians in North America. The ecumenical choir needs a strong “Lutheran section” of singers. The practicing of ecumenism often sweeps away many of the boogeymen of our thinking about ecumenism, as we rediscover this truth: **the closer we get to Jesus, the closer we also get to everyone else who belongs to Jesus!** And when that happens, God’s heart is warmed. Truly, *“how very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity!”* (Psalm 133:1)

For reflection and discussion:

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- What do you believe are the main reasons why there are so many different Christian denominations?
- How, in your experience, have ecumenical partnerships fostered Christian worship, witness and service?
- What avenues might your congregation explore to do God’s work better with our hands—joined to the hands of other (non-Lutheran) Christians?

## October: An American Church

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“...So one of the men who have accompanied us throughout the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us...must become a witness with us to his resurrection.” So they proposed two, Joseph called Barsabbas, who was also known as Justus, and Matthias. Then they prayed and said, “Lord, you know everyone’s heart. Show us which one of these two you have chosen to take the place in this ministry and apostleship from which Judas turned aside to go to his own place.” And they cast lots for them, and the lot fell on Matthias; and he was added to the eleven apostles.

### **Acts 1:21-26**

Then Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said, “Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. For as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, ‘To an unknown god.’ What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you....”

### **Acts 17:21-23**

Several years ago, while consulting with a congregation seeking to disaffiliate from our ELCA, a lay leader accosted me with these questions: “Bishop, why are you always trying to control us—to tell us what to do? Why is the ELCA such a top-down church body?”

Because this was the first time I had even met this gentleman or visited this congregation, I was at a loss for words. “*Control* you?” I wanted to ask—“heavens, I just met you!” I couldn’t honestly remember ever doing or saying anything to control this congregation or bark orders at them.

Reflecting on this encounter—and puzzling over the “question behind the question”—it occurred to me that this congregational president (whether he realized it or not) was giving voice to two of the dynamics that have been playing out ever since our Lutheran forebears first landed on these American shores:

- The dynamic of transitioning from church governance in a European “state church” environment to church governance in the context of America’s embrace of patterns of democratic decision making; and

- The dynamic of Lutherans moving from an Old World culture in which one religious group typically was predominant, to a New World culture marked by constantly-changing religious pluralism.

## State Church vs. Free Church

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The Lutheran church in North America is an immigrant church. We Lutherans didn't germinate spontaneously from the fertile soil of the New World. We were carried here by waves of immigrants who came, primarily from northern Europe, starting in the colonial period and extending into the early 20th century.

Almost all of these immigrants left behind Lutheran churches that were government-sanctioned in the countries of Europe—"state churches." Indeed, not a few of our forebears left the Old World *in order to escape* from what they regarded as the oppressive structures of such state church governance, in which kings and bishops ruled the churches in top-down fashion. They came to America to breathe the free air of democracy and to embrace new opportunities to shape their own destinies through the ballot-box—electing representatives to govern in townships, municipalities, counties, state legislatures and the U.S. Congress.

So it was only inevitable that these immigrant Lutherans would shape the ways they governed *their churches* in keeping with American principles of self-governance. Not that everything in church life—for example, core doctrines—would be subject to majority rule! But, by and large, governmental documents and structures in the Lutheran (and most other Protestant) churches largely reflected American principles of group consensus, voting processes and majority rule (with safeguards to protect minority viewpoints).

The theological basis for this approach hinged on our Lutheran insistence on the notion that "the finite is capable of bearing the infinite." That is, *God* is constantly at work in, with and under approaches to governance that call upon God's people to pray hard, think deeply and decide conscientiously. Although I'm describing this as an "American" approach to governance, elements of it are quite ancient—witness the "nomination and election" process that led the eleven disciples to choose a successor to Judas Iscariot in the curious story told in Acts 1:21-26 (quoted above).

The governing documents, policies and procedures of our Evangelical Lutheran Church in America simply have carried forward these American adaptations of European patterns of leading and governing the church. **I find our ELCA to be far more grass-roots oriented and consensus-**

**based than most critics (like the man who confronted me in the opening story above) who insist on labeling the ELCA a “top-down” organization.** The real questions we should ponder more deeply concern *our awareness of and engagement* in church decisions and opportunities to choose leaders to serve on our behalf in synodical and churchwide assemblies and other ELCA leadership groups. Thomas Jefferson and other founding fathers of America absolutely insisted on the necessity of an informed electorate, to insure the success of the American democracy. Our church continues to count on the same level of thoughtful awareness and prayerful engagement among the baptized who comprise the ELCA.

## Religious Monopoly vs. Religious Marketplace

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The ELCA reflects its “American-ness” not only in our largely democratic forms of church governance, but also in our appreciation for the gift of religious freedom, guaranteed by the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. In my opening story, the very existence of a “disaffiliation process” in our ELCA assumes that religious affiliation in America is a matter of heartfelt loyalty and informed choice, not coercion.

The genius of the American experiment in religious freedom is articulated in the two critical clauses of the First Amendment: “Congress shall make no law respecting an *establishment of religion*, or *prohibiting the free exercise thereof...*” The American founders simultaneously prohibited any state sponsored religion (no “state churches” as in Europe) and encouraged existence of a vibrant marketplace of ideas, including various religious convictions and spiritual paths.

Much ink continues to be spilled over the proper interpretation and application of the First Amendment. By and large, though, the First Amendment has furnished Lutherans and other religious groups with a free and open space in which to proclaim the gospel and establish faith communities. Though we still sometimes hanker for some of the vestiges of the privileged place our state church Lutheran forebears enjoyed in the “old country,” most of us are glad to serve God’s mission in Jesus Christ in the free exchange of ideas so central to the American experiment.

Theologically, we can embrace such freedom because we believe, teach and confess that God is at work in the Word and Sacraments that flow forth from the center of the church’s life. In the words of our Augsburg Confession of 1530, “*For through the Word and the sacraments as through*

*instruments the Holy Spirit is given, who effects faith where and when it pleases God in those who hear the gospel....*<sup>29</sup>

Because faith itself is always a sheer gift from God, we don't look to any earthly government to do the work that only the Holy Spirit is capable of. All we seek is a place to stand and bear witness to Christ. Just give us space to live out this faith, serving our God and our neighbors as best we can!

The gift of such freedom is crucial, now more than ever before. As many have pointed out, the 21st century bears a strong resemblance to the 1st century of Christian life and witness. In Acts 17 we encounter the peculiar story of the Apostle Paul visiting the Areopagus ("Mars Hill") in Athens, Greece. He beholds shrines to every god in the Greek pantheon of deities. Just to cover their tracks the Greeks had even put up a "To Whom it May Concern" shrine, in honor of "an unknown god." *Talk about religious pluralism!* Rather than being intimidated by this teeming spiritual marketplace, Paul plunges in and seizes the chance to proclaim the Good News about Jesus (albeit with mixed results).

ELCA folks in 2013 and beyond will be wise to learn from Paul's bold willingness to enter the fray. Rather than wringing our hands over how *secularized* our culture has supposedly become, let us recognize how we are actually immersed in a culture of religious *pluralism*. Spiritual seekers and the religiously famished don't wander around in a supposedly God-free zone; rather, we carry out our ministries in a "god-full" marketplace, where we bear witness to the Truth that sets us free (John 8).

As members of the Evangelical Lutheran Church *in America*, we take our context seriously. We thank God for a quarter-century of life in a church that invites and expects our active engagement in its corporate life. We rejoice in a church that recognizes and makes use of the profound gift of religious freedom.

For reflection and discussion:

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- Why do you think the ELCA is sometimes criticized for being a "top-down" church?

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<sup>29</sup> Augsburg Confession, Article V (p. 41 in the Kolb-Wengert edition of the Book of Concord)

- How could more disciples of Christ be drawn toward thoughtful awareness of and prayerful engagement in the decision-making processes in our congregations, synods and churchwide organization?
- How would your congregation need to operate differently if the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution were repealed?

## November: A Lutheran Church

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But now, apart from law, the righteousness of God has been disclosed, and is attested by the law and the prophets, the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe....For we hold that a person is justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the law.

**Romans 3:19-28**

How did I, poor stinking bag of maggots that I am, come to the point where people call the children of Christ by my evil name? Not so, dear friends, let us do away with party names, and be called Christians, for it is his teaching that we have.

**Martin Luther, 1483-1546<sup>30</sup>**

In the years leading up to the formation of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), folks were discussing what this new church should be called. Some suggested it was time to honor Martin Luther's request that his followers not call themselves "Lutherans."

In the end the Commission of Seventy that shaped the ELCA retained the word "Lutheran" as an important identifier for our church body. "Lutheran" bespeaks something critical about our history and core convictions as a church of the 16th century Reformation ignited by the renewing work and witness of Martin Luther (1483-1546). This month's bishop's column, coming to you between Reformation Sunday (October 27th) and Luther's 530th birthday (November 10th), **explores what it means for the ELCA to be a "Lutheran" church in this time and place.**

First, though, a word about what "Lutheran" does not mean for us. **Lutheran does not supersede our larger, fuller identity as Christian.** (I'm still struck by how often persons outside our church innocently ask, "But are 'Lutherans' Christian?") Lutheran does not mean we worship a fallible man or that we agree with everything he said or did. Lutheran doesn't imply that we're caught in some endless loop of trying to recreate a lost golden age.

And Lutheran doesn't mean that we're aptly characterized by certain nostalgic caricatures of Lutherans today—for example, in the memorable monologues of radio personality

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<sup>30</sup> Gerhardt Ebeling, *Luther, An Introduction to His Thought*, trans. R.A. Wilson (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1970), p. 31.

Garrison Keillor. As our new ELCA presiding bishop Elizabeth Eaton observes in this month's issue of *The Lutheran* magazine:

*"Lutheran does not coincide with Lake Wobegon. It's not found only in Philadelphia or Minneapolis or South Dakota, but everywhere from Maine to Hawaii, from Alaska to Puerto Rico. The cuisine of Lutheran is not limited to green bean casserole and Jell-O, but also tortillas, greens, fried rice and goat. It's not populated exclusively by the descendants of Central and Northern Europe, though there are a lot of those folks. It is not a place of rigid conformity or where anything goes."<sup>31</sup>*

So if "Lutheran" doesn't mean these things, what does it mean for our life, worship, witness and work in 2013? Here's a short list of responses for our reflection and discussion:

**Lutheran means that we read the Bible with gospel-eyes, through the "lens" of**

**Jesus Christ.** In my April 2013 column, I developed this notion in detail, *The ELCA at 25: A Church of the Word*. The strong, clear, gospel-driven definition of the "Word of God" tucked within the ELCA Confession of Faith is a great treasure and tool for mission.<sup>32</sup> Professor Timothy Wengert of our Philadelphia seminary reminds us

*"Our crucified and risen Savior is the Word.... We are not on a lark to find Bible verses to hurl at our enemies; we encounter the Word of God first as the Incarnate One.... We live and come to life each Sunday that someone proclaims the truth about the human condition (law) and the truth about God (gospel)—truths the Spirit takes to make believers out of unbelievers.... [And the Word is the Bible] understood not as a book of doctrines or a book of rules or even a book of future events but as the good news, the best news, of God in Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit. It is this simple, direct and non-Fundamentalistic approach to Scripture that needs to be front and center in all we do...."<sup>33</sup>*

**Lutherans means that our life is centered in the worshiping assembly where God**

**constantly meets us in Word and Sacrament.** Worship is not simply a time when we learn about God; it is when we encounter God who shows up in our midst in bread, wine, water, Word and the gathered Christian community. "At the center of our life is worship, and at the center of our worship is the crucified and risen Lord," notes Presiding Bishop Eaton. "We should be 'lost

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<sup>31</sup> Elizabeth A. Eaton, ["A Place Called Lutheran,"](#) *The Lutheran magazine* (November 2013 issue).

<sup>32</sup> See provision \*C2.02 in the [Model Constitution for Congregations of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America \(2013\)](#)

<sup>33</sup> Timothy Wengert, *Serving the Gospel for Tomorrow*, Appendix H in the [Living into the Future Together \(LIFT\) report](#) at the 2011 ELCA Churchwide Assembly, pp. 83-84.

in wonder, awe and praise,” and we should be intentional about the spiritual practices of worship, prayer, silence, generous giving and Scripture study.”<sup>34</sup>

**Lutheran means being honestly realistic about sin because we know how much God loves sinners and acts decisively to liberate them from sin.** Instead of always defining sin as “wrongful deeds,” our chief Lutheran confession (the Augsburg Confession of 1530) defines sin as “lack of fear of God and faith in God.”<sup>35</sup> Sin is a condition that infects our whole being; God acts to redeem us from our sinful condition through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus the Christ. Again, in the words of Presiding Bishop Eaton (imagining “Lutheran” as a place):

*“Lutheran would never be confused with utopia. Its citizens have too realistic a view of disobedience, sin and brokenness to believe that any human habitation can claim goodness and righteousness for itself. But Lutheran is also a place of great hope. Lutheran is a place where the incessant human struggle for self-righteousness and self-justification is left at the border and, free of the burden of making themselves holy and acceptable to God, its people cling to the cross of Christ as the true assurance of life. It’s a place where people can spend their lives in service to God and neighbor.”<sup>35</sup>*

**Lutheran means thinking, witnessing, working and living within the dynamic interplay (dialectic) of God’s law and God’s gospel.** I like to say that Lutherans are good at “talking out of both sides of our mouths,” meaning that we love dialectical ways of thinking, speaking and living. We hold together things that seem to be opposites of one another: sin and grace, old creation and new creation, confession and forgiveness, “now” and “not yet,” and (chiefly) law and gospel. Again, in the words of Professor Wengert:

*“The word of God that declares us righteous is precisely that very word that as law destroys all of our false idols that we fear and trust—including our works and decisions—and as gospel makes us believer....[T]his is completely counter-cultural. It does not correspond to our pious attempts to decide for Jesus or to our liberal claims that religion is what we make of it. In a world of control freaks, it seizes control from us and causes us to trust not ourselves but God and God’s work in Jesus Christ.”<sup>36</sup>*

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<sup>34</sup> Elizabeth A. Eaton, [“A Place Called Lutheran,” The Lutheran magazine](#) (November 2013 issue).

<sup>35</sup> Elizabeth A. Eaton, [“A Place Called Lutheran,” The Lutheran magazine](#) (November 2013 issue).

<sup>36</sup> Timothy Wengert, *Serving the Gospel for Tomorrow*, Appendix H in the [Living into the Future Together \(LIFT\) report](#) at the 2011 ELCA Churchwide Assembly, pp. 83-84.

**Lutheran means understanding the church as an event more than an object, a people more than an institution.** Too often our everyday speech betrays us. We speak of the church most naturally and most often as our worship space, our local congregation, or our denomination. But as the workshop of the Holy Spirit, the church is always more alive and dynamic than that. Professor Wengert declares:

*“The church is not a building; it is not an institution; it is not bishops or presbyters or the laity meeting in solemn assembly; the church is an event brought to life by the Holy Spirit working through word and sacrament. Its unity consists not in human agreements or constitutions but in faith and our confession of that faith. To be a part of the church is to be joined with believers of every time and place—with Abraham and Sarah, with Mary Magdalene and Paul, with Hildegard of Bingen and Martin Luther and Martin Luther King Jr. and all the rest, and with all who will come after us. Its unity does not consist in human traditions and regulations—as important as they may be for good order—but in faith, that is, in the work of the Holy Spirit through the word (aural and visible).”<sup>37</sup>*

**Lutheran means being “good for nothing,” that is—being freed by God’s grace to bear the fruit of the Spirit in our daily lives (vocation) not to become good but because Christ has liberated us precisely for self-forgetful good works for our neighbors and the whole creation.** I’ve been struck by how we ELCA folks have embraced the tagline of our church body: “God’s work. Our hands.” We appear to be growing in our ability to integrate work and witness, telling the story of Jesus while walking in the footsteps of Jesus. I’ll give Presiding Bishop Eaton the last word here:

*“We are church for the sake of the world. We have experienced God’s extravagant love in Jesus. We want others to know that love too. That is what motivates our evangelism and our work to make the abundant life promised by Jesus a reality for the most vulnerable.”<sup>38</sup>*

Everything I know about Martin Luther says that he meant it when he begged his followers not to name a church body after him. Nevertheless, as a “Lutheran” church we honor Brother Martin’s memory by embracing the faith and life of a redeemed people who boldly stake everything on the gospel and daringly give themselves away in witness and service in Christ’s world.

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<sup>37</sup> Timothy Wengert, *Serving the Gospel for Tomorrow*, Appendix H in the [Living into the Future Together \(LIFT\) report](#) at the 2011 ELCA Churchwide Assembly, pp. 83-84.

<sup>38</sup> Elizabeth A. Eaton, [“A Place Called Lutheran,” The Lutheran magazine](#) (November 2013 issue).

## For reflection and discussion:

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- Which of these six marks of being Lutheran do you observe most clearly and compellingly in your own congregation?
- Which of these six marks might God be calling your congregation to live into more deeply and imaginatively?
- What other distinctive marks of being Lutheran might well be lifted up in this time and place?

## December: An Incarnational Church

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[God's beloved Son] is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. For in him 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.

### **Colossians 1:15-20**

Jesus Christ is the Word of God incarnate, through whom everything was made and through whose life, death, and resurrection God fashions a new creation.

### **ELCA Confession of Faith<sup>39</sup>**



Last month over 900 youth and adult leaders participated in our synod's annual Middle School Gathering in Alexandria. Their theme was drawn from the magnificent epistle to the Colossians: **Christ is all and in all** (Col 3:11). In a variety of ways—through songs and speakers and learning and giving and simply being with other Christian youth—

participants delved deeply into the reality of the Incarnation. In my closing message to the gathering I invited my young friends to take home three convictions:

1. **God is all in Jesus:** the only God we need to know is the God who comes to us garbed in the flesh and blood of Jesus Christ who was born, lived, suffered, died and rose again for us and for our salvation.

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<sup>39</sup> (2.02.a in the Constitution, Bylaws and Continuing Resolutions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.)

2. **Jesus is *all in us*:** in our Baptism into Christ the incarnational presence of God-in-Christ gets extended to us who have been buried with Christ and raised with Christ (Romans 6:4). As the apostle Paul joyfully confessed: “It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me” (Galatians 2:20).
3. **We are *all in our neighbors*:** God’s incarnational strategy continues to play itself out as God-in-Christ lives and moves out into the world through the incarnated Body of Christ (the church) that gives itself away, as Christ did at the cross, for the sake of our neighbors.

In this glorious season of Advent we watch and wait for the Christ Child to be “born in us” (see verse 4 of “O Little Town of Bethlehem,” ELW #279) once again. Such is the rhythm of all of our life in Christ! And such is the heartbeat of our Evangelical Lutheran Church in America in all its expressions: congregations, synods, and the churchwide organization. As we conclude this 25th Anniversary of our church body during 2013, let us reflect on how the Incarnate Christ continues to be enfleshed in the mission and ministries of our ELCA faith communities.

## Christ Incarnate in Our Congregations

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The birth of the incarnate God was hardly noticed at first. The peasant girl Mary and her poor workingman husband Joseph were caught in the tiny backwater village of Bethlehem when the labor pangs began. The only earthlings to behold the newborn infant were grubby, ragtag shepherds. The incarnation of God in Jesus Christ didn’t make a splash in the world—at least not at first.

So also, in the basic cells of the Body of Christ— congregations!—the presence and the activity of the incarnate Christ can be easily missed. So much of the fabric of congregational life is so undramatic: prayer chains remember the sick, Sunday School teachers prepare lessons for little ones, funerals and funeral lunches comfort the grieving, baptismal water-and-Word claims new believers, canned goods are collected for the local food shelf, choirs practice for holiday cantatas, quilts for Lutheran World Relief are tied, invitations to weekly worship are extended, burdens are shared, promises are uttered, sins are forgiven.

But God-in-Christ is incarnated in all of these humble, hardly-noticed ways! In all of these activities and ministries congregations become signs pointing to the Kingdom of God coming into our midst.

## Think back over 2013:

- How has Jesus Christ become incarnated in the life of your congregation?
- Where have you beheld Christ's living presence in the seemingly small things your congregation does?

## Christ Incarnate For and With Our Neighbors

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Former ELCA Presiding Bishop Mark Hanson liked to say that **synods are the “connective tissue” in the Body of Christ** on earth. As congregations join forces with neighboring **congregations, the Body of Christ flexes muscles in mission**—muscles we may not always realize we have.

Recently, after I had spent part of a weekend in one of the parishes of our synod, I received the following note from the pastor:

*“Thank you for your visit! I hope you enjoyed yourself and gained insights into our parish’s situation. It has already changed some of the dynamics around here. Prior to your visit the church council and other leaders saw the synod office as the synod office rather than as individuals/partners with them.... I think having you present ideas on renewal of the church had a certain weight to it that cannot be duplicated by others....We tend to have an odd belief that renewal should only occur when things are not going well but your excitement and conviction regarding the efficacy of efforts to intentionally renew the ministry of a church came through. Thank you!”*



2013 Youth Mission Trip

Letters like this remind me of one of the most important ways we embody the life of Christ with one another: ***we show up for and with one another!*** (Humorist Woody Allen once observed that “80% of life is just showing up!”) And if we take the Apostle Paul at his word, when we (who through baptism are “in Christ”) show up, Christ shows up with us.

My colleagues and I who serve you on the synod staff have a bird’s eye view of so many of the ways we “show up” for one another and with one another in our synod. Here’s a sampling:

- Pastors show up every week in a dozen or so **text study groups** that meet informally across our synod—to help one another prepare for the great adventure of preaching.
- We show up for one another when one of our **congregations experiences an emergency**. Time and again congregations “close ranks” when a neighboring church temporarily finds itself without a pastor due to extended illness or disability or a family crisis.
- We show up for one another when **new opportunities to share Christ’s love present themselves**— for example, the “Invitation to Joy” evangelism project that’s happening in the Headwaters Conference, with financial support from the ELCA and synod supplementing local giving.
- We show up for one another when **a natural disaster strikes** part of the Body of Christ in our territory—recall the many floods of the Red River over the years or events like the 2010 tornado that tore through parts of Ottertail and Wadena counties.
- We show up for one another when it dawns on us that we might **accomplish more by cooperating** with neighboring congregations rather than going it alone—for example the “Kittson County ELCA Collaborative” which has brought together six ELCA congregations to co-sponsor a seminary internship and work together in youth ministry.

*Ponder what has happened in 2013:*

- How has your congregation “shown up” for neighboring congregations in our synod?
- How have other ELCA believers or parishes or members of the synod staff “shown up” for you?

## Christ Incarnate Across the Globe

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The incarnate Christ is as close to us as our next heartbeat, the next breath we take. But this incarnate Christ is also always simultaneously the cosmic Christ—never our cozy, “personal” possession. *“He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together....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.”* (Colossians 1).

Among the great gifts of being part of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America are the manifold ways we actually see how the incarnate Body of Christ covers and cares for the whole world. Just within the last few weeks we’ve witnessed how our ELCA has joined with other Christian churches and people of goodwill in caring for victims of Super Typhoon Haiyan—one of the strongest storms in recorded history, with

- more than 13 million people impacted by the storm,
- 3.4 million people displaced,
- 1.1 million homes destroyed,
- 5,235 reported dead, and
- 1,613 reported missing.



The incarnate Lord Jesus Christ, through agencies like Lutheran Disaster Response-International is providing for the most urgent needs. According to one of the latest ELCA updates: *“An initial distribution of 1,457 shelter repair kits is being completed in northern Cebu in coordination with Habitat for Humanity- Philippines.... Working with Lutheran World Relief, 240 LifeStraw Community water filters will be distributed through ChildFund Philippines in four areas of Eastern Visayas and four areas of Western Visayas. LifeStraw is a high-volume water purifier with built-in storage to provide safe drinking water to a community.... In the coming weeks, cash-for-work debris removal programs will be implemented in the northern Cebu and western Leyte regions. These programs will provide participants money to buy food and repair their homes.”*<sup>40</sup>

When our synod’s Middle School Gatherings were held last month, the youngsters and their adult leaders learned about, **prayed for and received an offering on behalf of Lutheran Disaster**

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<sup>40</sup> <http://www.elca.org/News-and-Events/blogs/ELCALutheranDisasterResponse/187>

**Response.** The portable, storable love (money) they gave—over \$4,000—became another way the incarnate Christ reached out across the world from Alexandria to the Philippines. **Friends, this sort of thing is happening *all the time* through the national and global ministries of our Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.**

*Reflect back on the year now drawing to a close:*

- What are some ways you and members of your congregation incarnated the love of Christ through your participation in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America?

## Prayer

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Almighty God, you have filled all the earth with the light of your incarnate Word. By your grace empower us to reflect your light in all that we do, through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

**Prayer for the Second Sunday of Christmas, ELW, p. 21**