

President's Message June 19, 2017

How can we do justice to celebrating the 500th anniversary of the Lutheran Reformation? This question is before us as we gather for our synod's 100th annual convention. It is a question our congregations are asking as they arrange their area worship services this coming October. When our synod's Centennial Committee looked at appropriate ways to honor back-to-back anniversaries (the 500th now and in 2018 the ELS 100th), it felt a significant way to wed the two was to implement a synod-wide Bible study. We are happy to say the project has come to fruition and is ready to be rolled out in our congregations this coming fall. The Bible study, *Proclaiming God's Truth*, has been authored by members of our synod's Doctrine Committee. The study includes a teacher's guide and covers seven topics central to Lutheranism and to the history of our church body. The doctrines treated in the study are these: *Objective Justification and Absolution, The Election of Grace and Conversion, The Divine Call, Church Fellowship, Adiaphora and Ceremonies, Mission Work, and Christian Education*. It is our hope that each congregation plans to use these lessons, hopefully beginning this fall. Certainly, this is a way for us as a synod to express gratitude to God and to grow in our faith and understanding of his precious Word. The psalmist has written, "I will sing to the Lord all my life... May my meditation be pleasing to him, as I rejoice in the Lord" (Psalm 104:33, 34).

"So...you're a Lutheran... Well, *what's* a Lutheran?" How do you respond? You wonder what people are expecting for an answer. That can vary by our regions of residence. In the South and out West more explanation probably is necessary. In Minnesota and the Midwest people may expect you even to differentiate between the familiar acronyms – ELS, WELS, LCMS, ELCA, etc. Then, on the other hand, a person who asks could just be looking for a chance to have a little fun about potlucks and funeral Jello! But, in all seriousness, to confess "I'm a Lutheran" demands more attention than simply, "Well, I'm ELS... so check us out at *els.org!*"

Our convention theme and the three essays this year are meant to assist us in responding to what it really means to be a Lutheran. For our three days here together, we will observe the benefits of the Reformation by focusing on what is known as the "three great *solas*" – **Scripture alone, Grace alone, and Faith alone**. Simply put, we can say:

A true Lutheran confesses and teaches only what is clearly taught in Scripture, not looking for spiritual strength beyond it and not being content with anything less for establishing and confessing doctrinal truth. The teachings set forth in God's Word present the heart and center of our faith: Jesus Christ is our God and Savior who gives us forgiveness of sins, life and salvation. We sinners – all of us, including those who are not of the faith but need to be brought into the fold – have been declared acquitted of sin's guilt and punishment freely by the work and grace of Christ alone. In fact, his resurrection from the dead is the proof we have been declared righteous in God's sight. This great news is received by faith alone, worked only by the Holy Spirit in the hearts of sinners through Word and Sacrament. By this faith we obtain the glorious bodily resurrection and life everlasting in heaven.

It is a sad and sorry reality that, because of today's widely acclaimed brand of Lutheranism with its constant drift and rift away from Scripture, we find ourselves almost apologetically stating we

are members of what is known as THE EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH. Dr. Martin Luther could never have imagined just how far afield much of the church bearing his name has now abandoned so many truths of the Christian faith, the faith for which he resolutely put his life on the line. Yet this should never diminish our desire and commitment to confess the Lutheran doctrine and even the name, not in a self-aggrandizing and boastful manner but solely by the grace of God and only to his glory. As one Luther scholar of the late 1800s properly stated: “Let her consent to be called THE EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH, to testify, if God so please, to the end of time, that she is neither ashamed of the Gospel of Christ, nor of Christ’s servant who, in the presence of earth and of hell, restored that Gospel, preached it, lived it, and died in the triumphs of its faith.”¹

But what are we doing with it all? Absorbing the *Lutheran doctrine* for ourselves and for our family members is, of course, essential. Where would we be without the clear teachings God has set forth in his Word, and as they are so plainly presented in Luther’s Small and Large Catechisms and as further expounded in the Lutheran Confessions? Yet this body of great teaching is not intended to be simply boxed up and opened in the confines of our own homes or in the perimeters of our own church walls. Others desperately need to hear what we have been privileged to know and believe. So many people – ones even quite unlike us in background, nationality and skin color – have souls just like ours that require the connection to our Lord Jesus Christ and to his work of redemption presented in Word and Sacrament.

We may falsely imagine the Lutheran Church as being noticeably static and lacking in its emphasis on missions. I remember back in the 1970s when a strong push for evangelism programs was in vogue, some were unduly critical of Lutherans for not being so involved in the mission movements. Many contended that the Lutheran fathers did not have a real concern for the spread of the gospel in any concerted or organized manner. But one of our ELS fathers, Dr. B. W. Teigen, prudently offered this reaction in his popular *I Believe* series, published during the decade of the “Kennedy questions”:

A little thoughtful reflection will reveal that our forefathers were “mission-minded.” They were zealous in proclaiming the saving Gospel of the free forgiveness of sins through faith in Jesus Christ. But they wanted to preach only Christ’s Gospel, revealed in the Scriptures. Any other Gospel would not be the Gospel that saves (Gal. 1:6-9). Despite the adverse political, economic and religious situations that existed from 1517 to 1577, one can only wonder at the rapid spread of the Gospel. In 1517 there were indeed some who found their only hope for salvation in the merits of Christ, but a far greater number pinned their hopes of gaining God’s favor and the forgiveness of sins on their own work-righteousness. The over 8,000 who subscribed to the Formula [of Concord] in 1577 are a great testimony to the efforts of the Reformers to carry out the mission command of Christ to preach the Gospel to all nations.²

¹ Charles Porterfield Krauth, *The Conservative Reformation and Its Theology* (reprint ed., Fortress Press, Philadelphia, PA: 1963), p. 122.

² Bjarne W. Teigen, “I Believe: A Study of the Formula of Concord,” (Bethany Lutheran College, Mankato, MN, 1977), pp. 3-4.

Can we carry the legacy of Luther and the Reformers to many more souls in our own corners of the world, especially through home missions while not neglecting in any way our efforts in world outreach? Our synod recently came through a five-year mission plan that intended to have every one of our 130 congregations see itself as a “mission congregation.” We urged each church to view itself strategically in its respective locale as a catalyst for reaching people who do not yet know Christ. Through our Board for Home Outreach, we as a synod extended a call for an Evangelism-Missions Counselor. The counselor has a two-fold task: assisting our home missionaries and also lending counsel and aid to established churches. If any of our congregations has not used the services of Pastor Wentzlaff and the resources available (<http://els.org/resources/evangelism/>), we encourage you to be in touch with him for a visit. This can generate good and practical ideas on how best to fulfill the Lord’s great commission right in our own backyards. The words of the apostle Peter, underscored often by Luther, remind us as fellow redeemed children of God that we are “a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God.” And for what purpose? In order that we might “declare the praises of him who called [us] out of darkness into his wonderful light” (1 Peter 2:9).

By the way, it is interesting to note that the “Daily Luther Quote,” posted by Northwestern Publishing House as #170 for this very day – the 19th of June – contains a great mission emphasis. The citation is taken from Luther’s Large Catechism. We reference it here:

The work is done and accomplished, for Christ has acquired and gained the treasure for us by his suffering, death, resurrection, etc. But if the work remained concealed so that no one knew of it, then it would be in vain and lost. So that this treasure, therefore, might not lie buried but be appropriated and enjoyed, God has caused the Word to go forth and be proclaimed, in which he gives the Holy Spirit to bring this treasure home and appropriate it to us (LC, Creed, 38-39).

So, we say: We want to get the Word out! Our existence as the Evangelical Lutheran Synod is for this purpose. May we always keep before us, in our collective windshield, the driving mission of our Lord. Our synod’s agencies – Bethany Lutheran Seminary; Bethany Lutheran College; our seven sponsored foreign mission fields; our boards and committees through which we carry out the work of our church body; the schools and congregations served by our teachers and pastors; the youth leaders and our young people who plan and carry out Christ-centered activities; and, yes, even our many meetings like this one – all are intended for the purpose of bringing the Greatest News ever recorded to all people, young and old, wherever we are given opportunity to influence. We desire to point sinners to the Savior, for “in him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins” (Ephesians 1:7).

With this in mind, it is fitting to express sincere thanks to the congregations, pastors, teachers and individual members of our synod for their prayers and contributions this past year. The year of 2016 is the first time in almost a decade where we exceeded the adopted congregational-giving portion of our budget. Truly this is something for which we give special thanks to God! We pray the same generosity will continue overflowing with thanksgiving as we strive to carry out the goal of our Anniversary Offering. The goal is three-fold. The synod’s Board for Home Missions proposes to use the proceeds 1) to fund new missions, 2) to fund the Vicar-in-Mission

program, and 3) to support and encourage opportunities for cross-cultural mission projects. If our churches have not yet presented the materials for this offering drive, we urge them to do so. Pastor Dan Basel, our Giving Counselor and chairman of the Anniversary Offering Committee, is eager to provide assistance (507-344-7311 or danbasel@blc.edu)).

Oh, there are obvious challenges. Our society's ever-increasing secularism with its changing mores makes the whole idea of church-going seem quite anachronistic, if not an outright "unnecessary distraction." Statistically we can see a slide in church attendance, not atypical to that experienced in other church bodies. Yet the stats serve as a sober reminder of the reality our ELS encounters in its places of worship dotted throughout seventeen states. Half of the congregations in our synod (65 of 130) have an average attendance on Sunday morning that is 38 or below.³ A number of these congregations are rural and, in many cases, are found in a combined parish setting.⁴ While it is true, with no surprise, that our smaller congregations (e.g., the 65 churches) are more likely to face significant loss in average attendance over a 10-year span, among the ten largest congregations in our synod there were six in the past decade that also saw a decrease in average Sunday attendance (ranging between 26 less in the pews to 5 less). Without consulting any necessary demographic study (including less children in our church families), the statistics seem to show that much work can be done not only to reach the unchurched in our communities but to reengage rostered members who have withdrawn from attending.

However, three significant facts give us great optimism, strength and comfort as we move forward with our endeavors to proclaim God's Word when and where we are able. In fact, while these three are well-known, they bear repeating since the devil, the world and our own flesh strive to suck the life out of our mission efforts. To God's solid statements we flee, as we consider these three:

- **We have God's assurance that he has us believers remain on this earth – even now in our set locations – for the purpose of serving the overall growth of his kingdom.** "The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance" (2 Peter 3:9). "And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come" (Matthew 24:14).
- **We, within our varied vocations in life, are merely *servants* of the Lord as we support (whether clergy or lay) the advance of his gospel. It is our gracious and mighty *Lord alone* who works the results.** The apostle Paul wrote: "I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow" (1 Corinthians 3:6, 7).
- **We have the most potent weapon to combat every enemy of the Christian faith, and yet this same antidote is the most soothing balm for every sin-laden conscience: the saving gospel of Christ!** "By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you" (1 Corinthians 15:2). "God was reconciling the world to himself in

³ From a comprehensive 2015 statistical analysis compiled by Elsa Ferkenstad.

⁴ Among these 65 churches: 28 of these are located in Minnesota & Iowa; 12 in Washington and Oregon; 10 in Wisconsin.

Christ, not counting men's sins against them. And he has given to us the message of reconciliation" (2 Corinthians 5:19).

The Lutheran Reformation has had a profound impact. That impact can be seen also in the secular realm, e.g., elevating the education of children, expressing appreciation for a wide range of vocations, and differentiating the spheres of the Two Kingdoms (secular and spiritual). In the church, the Reformation brought to the fore the clear answer from God's Word to life's most important question – how a sinner is justified in the presence of a holy God. We are justified freely by God's grace alone through faith in Jesus Christ alone (Romans 3). But the powerful impression left by the Lutheran Reformation is not only theoretical or dogmatic. It is *personal*. It is our *life-blood*. For, the Lutheran doctrine is the true confession of what already was once delivered to our world in the writings of the Lord's prophets, apostles and evangelists. "In our office, wherever it may be, we bear the responsibility for maintaining the Lutheran church and her doctrine. But we can only do this if we confess this doctrine ourselves. May God grant us all the strength and fortitude for such confessing, without which no true theology exists."⁵

Let our convention ring with praise for the great blessings we have received! Let us go forth from this hall to our parishes with renewed zeal to teach the simple truths of Luther's Catechism. Let us also trust God to give us the necessary conviction to "contend for the faith once delivered to the saints" (Jude 3).

To God alone be the glory!

J. A. Moldstad



⁵ H. Sasse, *Letter to Lutheran Pastors, Volume 2*. M. Harrison transl. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House 2014), p. 261.