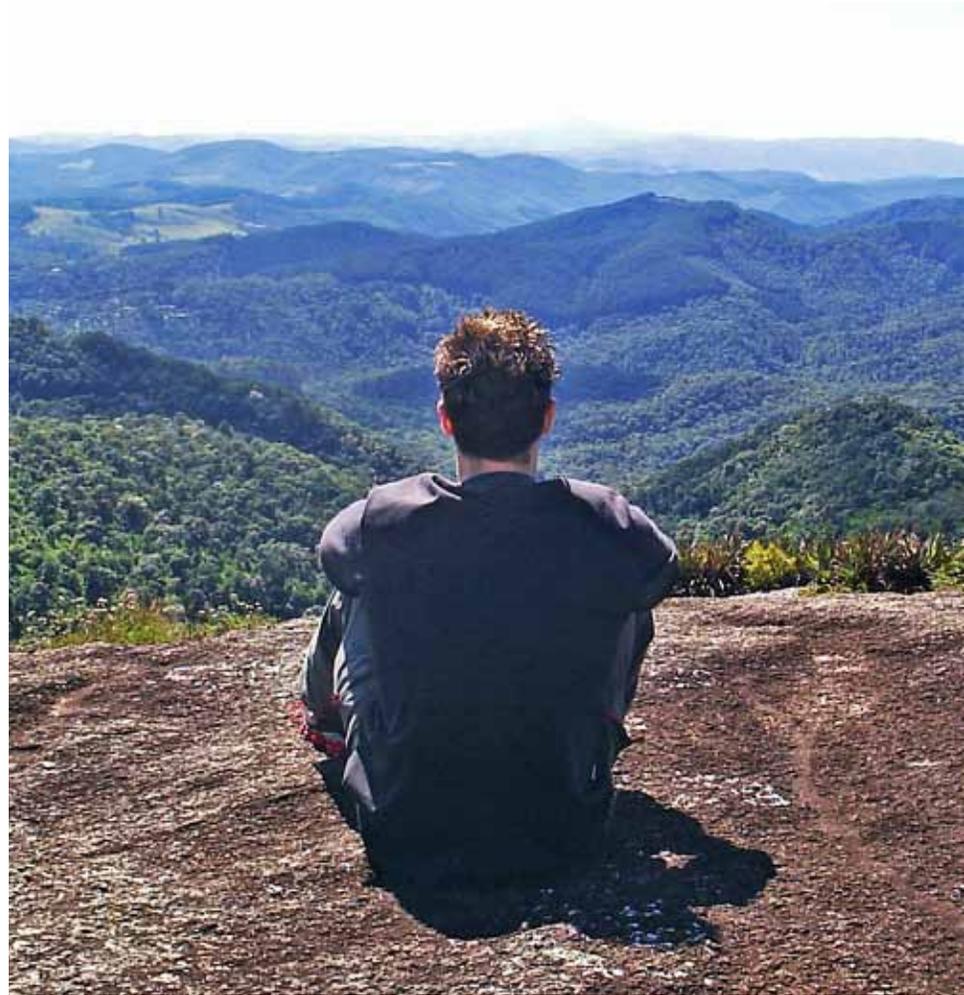


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*An Inter-Lutheran Journal  
for Practitioners and  
Teachers of Pastoral Care  
and Counseling*



# CARING CONNECTIONS

# C O N T E N T S

## **Special Issue** **Zion XIV: Firm Foundations**

**3**     **The Purpose of Caring Connections**

**4**     **Editorial**

*Kevin Massey*

**5**     **Keynote Address**

*Frederick Niedner*

**19**    **Plenary Session**

*Mark S. Hanson*

**26**    **Bible Study**

*Shauna Hannan*

**37**    **The State of SPM in the LCMS**

*an interview with John Fale*

**40**    **Christus in Mundo Awardees**

**40**    **News, Announcements, Events**

**42**    **How to Subscribe**

# THE PURPOSE OF *CARING CONNECTIONS*

*Caring Connections: An Inter-Lutheran Journal for Practitioners and Teachers of Pastoral Care and Counseling* is written by and for Lutheran practitioners and educators in the fields of pastoral care, counseling, and education. Seeking to promote both breadth and depth of reflection on the theology and practice of ministry in the Lutheran tradition, *Caring Connections* intends to be academically informed, yet readable; solidly grounded in the practice of ministry; and theologically probing.

*Caring Connections* seeks to reach a broad readership, including chaplains, pastoral counselors, seminary faculty and other teachers in academic settings, clinical educators, synod and district leaders, others in specialized ministries, and—not least—concerned congregational pastors and laity. *Caring Connections* also provides news and information about activities, events, and opportunities of interest to diverse constituencies in specialized ministries.

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# Editorial

The past October 21<sup>st</sup> to 24<sup>th</sup>, 2010, I was privileged to attend Zion XIV at the Simpsonwood Retreat Center in Georgia. The gathering was a wonderful time of networking, learning, and refreshment for all in attendance. This issue of *Caring Connections* is dedicated to sharing with our readers some of the presentations made during the conference and uplifting those honored by the Christus in Mundo awards for the gathering.

The Conference's theme was "Firm Foundations." A wonderful series of speakers shared bible studies and presentations on this theme. The presentations and notes of speakers from Zion that are re-presented in this issue of *Caring Connections* are from Rev. Dr. Frederick Niedner, Presiding Bishop Mark Hanson, and Rev. Dr. Shauna Hannan. Additionally an interview with Rev. John Fale is presented sharing insights and perspectives on specialized ministry.

As at previous Zion gatherings, we witnessed the presentation of Christus in Mundo awards. This issue includes the names and bios of our four Christus in Mundo awardees, Lee Joesten, George Doebler, Bruce Hartung, and Bruce Pederson.

We have exciting news to share about the next Zion Gathering! While plans are still underway, pencil in October 24-27, 2013 at Lutheridge Lutheran Camp and Conference Center in Arden North Carolina, about ten miles from Asheville. Organizers promise that this corresponds with peak weeks for fall colors in western North Carolina. The area provides a number of tourist attractions such as the Biltmore Estate, Thomas Wolf and Carl Sandburg homes, and other historic sites. Asheville is the center for studios that sell Appalachian crafts and arts and the pride of the east coast for pristine mountain viewing is the Blue Ridge Parkway, only five miles away. Further planning including theme and key presenters is still forthcoming but plan to be in North Carolina for the next Zion!

Once again, if you haven't already done so, we hope you will subscribe online to *Caring Connections*. Remember, **subscription is free!** By subscribing, you assure that you will receive prompt notification when each issue of the journal appears on the *Caring Connections* website. This also helps the editors and the editorial board to get a sense of how much interest is being generated by each issue. We are delighted that the numbers of those who check in is increasing with each new issue. You can subscribe by clicking on the subscription link on [www.caringconnections.org](http://www.caringconnections.org), or by following the directions given on the masthead (p. 3), or in larger print on page 42.

## Call for Articles

*Caring Connections* seeks to provide Lutheran Pastoral Care Providers the opportunity to share expertise and insight with the wider community. We want to invite anyone interested in writing an article to please contact the editors, Rev. Kevin Massey and Rev. Chuck Weinrich.

Specifically, we invite articles for upcoming issues on the following themes.

Summer 2011 "Interim Ministry"

Fall 2011 "Sacred Spaces in an Increasingly Diverse Culture"

# Keynote Address

It's no accident that nearly 80% of the Pentateuch (Exodus 15 to the end of Deuteronomy) is set in the wilderness.

## Part I

Thank you for the invitation to join you at this 14th Zion Conference. I'm delighted to be with you, to see again those of you who are old friends I haven't seen in a long time, and also to meet those of you I don't yet know. I'm truly honored to be asked to come a second time, after the privilege of doing the Bible studies for Zion X, back in 1998, at Augsburg College in Minneapolis.

Thank you for the work you do. You minister to the faithful who remain well-connected to community and church, but for the moment find themselves in need of special care in some place where, although they are strangers, you are not. You stand in for the rest of us, for communities off at some distance. Thank you.

You are also, very often, practitioners of what a non-clergy friend taught me to call "the ministry to strays." You're the servants who find and tend to the lost sheep. Some folks work in the temple. Most of your work happens on the road to Jericho, where people end up lying half dead in the ditch—even when that ditch happens to be a new, sterile hospital room or in some other institution somewhere in the city. Thank you.

You also help create communities that nurture the delightful 18-to-22-year-olds with whom I spend most of my workdays. Families, churches, and communities are doing better work at this than many would have us believe, at least if my students are typical. Thank you.

Thank you, too, for sending me to the wilderness, which is where I've been, in a way, ever since Zion X back in 1998, because your theme for that conference was "One Voice, Crying in the Wilderness," and I had to go to the wilderness in order to hear exactly who was out there crying. That exercise helped me immensely to understand where I'd lived for a long time, and I've been studying the wilderness as one of the Bible's most pervasive and important metaphors ever since. I'll take us back there for a bit today.

Although this is a keynote address, I'm still a Bible guy. I still teach Bible even when I'm keynoting, I admit. I love to blow up the Bible's metaphors into murals, so we can see what a "habitat" they become for us. If you live long enough and hear enough scripture and preaching, we don't merely hear the stories, sooner or later we live inside them. They become not only habit, but habitat.

With that, I'll start where I left on in 1998, in the wilderness, because the conversations I had with confer-



ence planners about why they chose "Firm Foundations" as this year's theme tell me that you're very much in the wilderness at this point. What did I hear, or intimate, from these conversations?

*If you live long enough and hear enough scripture and preaching, we don't merely hear the stories, sooner or later we live inside them. They become not only habit, but habitat.*

These are among the challenges you face as I heard them described:

- As for so many who do ministry, there is little nurture for the nurturers, few chaplains to the chaplains, and sometimes no pastor for the pastors.

- It's hard to have community of colleagues who do your kind of work. Even finding ways to meet is tough. Many of your institutions no longer pay for travel or cover registration fees. No one wants to pay for or support filling up the feeders, serving the servants, listening to the listeners.
- The inter-Lutheran dimension of the community that might be supportive is more difficult all the time thanks to growing rift between Lutheran bodies (LCMS/WELS and ELCA).
- Being caught between denominational pressures and institutional pressures gets tough as trying to serve two masters.
- The more professionalized chaplaincy becomes, the more it gets unhooked from faith. Sometimes it even seems that faith, or at least expression thereof, is out of bounds.
- Denominations on the one hand ignore chaplains, don't support them; on the other, they make ecclesiastical endorsement (with district president or bishop) somewhat tough.
- When it's necessary to do so, how do you explain the ways in which Lutheran theology is at the heart of pastoral care?
- In short, chaplains live in a kind of exile. Theirs is a struggle to remain faithful in a foreign land. You need to obey the empire's rules, but still be faithful to your calling, to the gospel, to Christ. Sometimes that means having to abandon your own language of faith so no one will be offended—you must speak the language of the empire.

HOW THEN DOES ONE MAKE A SPECIFICALLY LUTHERAN, CHRISTIAN WITNESS AND ENGAGE IN PASTORAL WORK THAT HAS A SPECIFICALLY LUTHERAN "FOUNDATION?"

I can't speak to all these things, but I can begin to talk about living amidst these unsettling realities by helping us to ask anew, what is foundational? What do we trust to hold us up no matter what? In one way, that's a simple question for Lutherans, thanks to our being heirs of Luther's "theology of the cross." We preach Christ crucified, foolish as that may sound to those who want signs and proofs or philosophy and statecraft instead of God's simple promise of faithfulness.

For us, the ultimate, indeed the clearest and fullest revelation of God is the one we find in the crucified Christ. If you want to see God, look there. On the cross. There is God, fully and completely present, come to join us on our side of all that's wrong, broken, painful, and deadly in this world, so much of which is of our own making. God was in Christ, the crucified Christ, reconciling the world to himself. It was the only way we could ever be together, God and us. God alone could cross the chasm.

Other things may reveal at least something of God. The cosmos reveals God. Our own remarkable natures ("made in the image of God," as we say) reveal something of God, as do the testimony of sacred scriptures. But in

the end we are like the disciple Thomas. Indeed, we are the twins of Thomas, who has no Lord and God save the one with those ruined hands and ripped open side, the one who was crucified.

The God who has in Jesus Christ descended to hell, known the abandonment out of which he cries, "My God, my God, why . . .?" — that is the God of whom Luther could say, "He has unhelled hell." Or as Luther

*Chaplains live in a kind of exile. Theirs is a struggle to remain faithful in a foreign land. You need to obey the empire's rules, but still be faithful to your calling, to the gospel, to Christ.*

says in many places, "That he descended to hell means that no matter where I might ever find myself, even there he is Lord for me." The God whose presence we know in such absence is the one of whom we can say, "Even though I lose my grip—and I will lose my grip—God never lets go." That is the gospel, not that if I am faithful, God will cling to me; but rather, precisely when I can no longer hang on, understand, and believe, God clings to me." The older I get, the more Luther's meaning to the Third Article of the Apostles' Creed becomes for me devotional, not doctrinal: *I believe that I cannot (by my own reason or strength) believe. . . , but the Holy Spirit never, ever gives up, and keeps on calling, gathering, enlightening, sanctifying, and keeping me and you and us.* I believe that I cannot believe. BUT. That's the biggest "but" in our theology, or maybe anywhere.

This is our foundation. Without that, the platform of our life and ministry tips the way the ancients thought the cosmos would if its pillars ever gave way, and we slide into the deep.

The next level of foundational stuff for me is what I have learned from Article IV of the Apology to the Augsburg confession, which explains how we know when we have this foundational message straight: When we honor the death of Christ and our message comforts penitent hearts.<sup>1</sup>

If our message ever becomes one in which the death of Christ is unnecessary, even partly, or insufficient such that it needs the added boost of some piety, obedience, or correctness, we have dishonored the death of Christ and we're preaching or ministering from something other than gospel.

If instead of comforting penitent hearts we lay burdens on them, throw them back on their own devices, make them look for certainty anywhere else but in God's promise and Christ's having joined us in our pit of damnation, we may proclaim an interesting message or minister from an apparently sound theoretical basis, but it's not gospel.

And always, always, we do this work in the wilderness,

and in response to the temptations and crazy-making desperation of the wilderness. It's no accident that nearly 80% of the Pentateuch (Exodus 15 to the end of Deuteronomy) is set in the wilderness. The prophets continually take us back to and through the wilderness, either back into slavery (Hosea) or from exile toward home (Isaiah 40-55). The gospels begin with prophetic voices crying in the wilderness and Jesus' ministry can't be launched without establishing clarity of purpose by means of a testing in the wilderness.

I gave you my personal take on the meaning of the Bible's term for *wilderness* back in 1998. Indeed, thanks to the assignment you gave me back then, I "discovered" this meaning, at least for myself. Let me summarize. The Hebrew word is *midbar* (מִדְבָּר). To find it in a Hebrew lexicon, you must look up *dbr* (דָּבַר). That, of course, is the root of *dabar* (דְּבָר) and *diber* (דִּבֶּר), the words for word (or deed) and speech. Put a preposition of separation on it, *min* (מִן), and you have "without word(s)" or "beyond words." [Interestingly, the NT word is similar: *Eremos* (ερημος) is also a word for speech, *rema* (ῥῆμα), with a pre-fixed preposition that signifies separation, *e* (ἐ);.]

As a place name, it identifies the place beyond words and description, the no-place place that lies between bondage and freedom—every kind of bondage and freedom, whether between slavery in Egypt and freedom in some land of milk and honey we've never yet laid eyes on, or between addiction and serenity, between living in the captivity of abuse and living freely and without fear, between the custody of childhood and the liberty of adulthood, between the constraints of economic crash and the promised recovery.

Bondage is always awful. We hate it. But at least we know the rules. Back in Egypt, we didn't know much, but we knew how many bricks to make, and where to get the straw. When we were abused, we hated our abusers, but at least we got to say that everything wrong with our lives was their fault. Once upon a time, others told us exactly what to do, and we did it. And now we're here, no longer slaves, but not quite free, either. And even if our previous state was slavery, so often we long to go back—to all the "free food" we had in Egypt, to the clarity of that existence. At least we knew the rules! Never mind we had all that at the price of slavery and things that made us suffer.

Wilderness is also the place between home and exile, and between exile and home. Going either direction, we have lost all our words and we must learn to speak the language and live by the rules of the empire that took us from our homes; or if we're going home, we'll need to un-learn the language, values, and laws of empire and try again to learn the culture and speak the ancestors' mother tongue. Wilderness travelers include not only those making cultural shifts, but divorcing people who suddenly have no home, and no words for making sense of their emptiness, loneliness, and severed attachments.

In this wilderness live so many to whom you minister—all the widows and orphans who must adjust to the difference between life *with* and life *without*. This number includes all those once healthy and intact folks who now live in the wilderness of cancer, dementia, or any other condition that makes nonsense of all the ways the world used to make sense.

*Bondage is always awful. We hate it. But at least we know the rules.*

All these are the wilderness, the place that defies description, where our old words don't work and we don't yet have new ones yet. So we speak the garbled language of the wilderness known as "murmuring." (As in English, the Hebrew for murmuring is onomatopoeic. Hear the low, grinding murmur of a whole people complaining in Hebrew, *lanu-lanu-lanu*; or in Greek, *gogizzo-gogizzo-gogizzo*.) It's the language of emptiness, bitterness, and accusation.

Most importantly, perhaps, no one plans to stay for long in the wilderness, but truth be told, no one leaves the wilderness alive. None of the murmurers, anyway. (Any non-murmurers here?)

What does our wilderness look, sound, taste, and smell like? I've described some of what I heard from your conference planners, not so much murmuring as the articulation of the obvious contours of the wilderness. We have no water, no food. We're in a strange, uncharted land without direction or signs pointing toward a meaningful future. Sometimes we long to go back to another time, when at least it seemed our provisions were more abundant, our direction clearer, our mandate more certain.

But we can't go back.

## Temptation

For all these reasons, I think, the book of Deuteronomy says that the wilderness between Egypt and the promised land was one, long test. God tested Israel, and Israel tested God (cf. e.g., Deut. 6:16 and 8:16). Would Israel remain faithful and true? Would God remain merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and repenting of the evil God sometimes decided to visit upon the murmuring people?

The temptations Jesus encounters as options for defining his messianic work mirror those of Israel's wilderness sojourn.

If only we had food. Enough of all the stuff and staff of life so that no one need ever go hungry again. Or fight about food, or go to war over stuff. And wouldn't that fix the world, Mr. Messiah, if all of us had *enough*?

If only someone would leap from some high precipice, not merely to show of that he could do it and live, but to do it with us on his back, over the valley of the shadow

of illness and accident and heart attack, so no one, ever, would die too young. We'd all get our fair share, three-score years and ten, and maybe more. Never again would we bury our children, or as friends did back home while I flew here on Thursday, bury a 38-year old pastor who experienced chest pains after doing a funeral last Friday, was treated at the emergency room for acid reflux, and by Saturday morning was dead of a burst aorta. No more stories like that, Messiah. Let everyone get a full span of life.

If only someone would take over the world and run it peacefully and benignly. Then we'd have the world we want. But how to do it? Satan's way? That is, bowing to the way of empire, conquering and ruling by means of fear and intimidation, buying into the notion that we can fix the world once and for all with a well-placed blow to the bully's jaw?

No, Jesus chooses the way of the cross.

He becomes king, all right. A crucified king, with sorry lieutenants on his right and left, and having invited all the rest of us to come along on the way of cross-bearing.

He heals a few people of their diseases, but they all had to die again. So instead of making them death-proof, he invited them to come with him, to have his "eternal life," the one that begins with baptism, and is lived out in giving one's life, not in trying to save it.

He feeds people, with loaves and fishes, but mostly with himself. He becomes our bread, our nourishment, our cup of life—by giving himself away. By dying.

This is all another way, perhaps, to describe the same foundation I noted earlier. Our message is always Christ crucified. We don't have conventional forms of plenty, peace, and certainty to offer folks in their wordless and nutrition-less voids and places of bewilderment. We only have the gospel, the foolish gospel, and we have ourselves to give away in crucified form. How do we do that—give away ourselves in crucified form—as our ministry in the wilderness?

### Embodying Gospel in the Wilderness

Like much of the rest of the world, I was fascinated by the story of the Chilean miners trapped half a mile underground from August 5th until last weekend. Their experience has been called many things, including resurrection and rebirth. It surely is those things. But much of their story remains to be told. What was their life really like down there in the darkness for ten weeks? (Throughout their ordeal, I wondered if I could name 33 people who could tolerate being with me for what turned out to be 69 days?)

One detail struck me last weekend as a few of those men talked briefly after being rescued. A miner told a TV interviewer that the group promised to wait with telling their story, but he could say this, "Religion and humor kept us going. That's what we lived on." (The same fellow shared the story of how the miner who had the most severe health problems played dead one morning. He lay

as unresponsive as possible, hiding even his breathing as best he could, and when comrades became alarmed and some even began to grieve, he popped up and said, "Gotcha!" Of course, they all laughed.)

Because I was thinking about coming here when I heard that, and I was listening also to my own community and living in the usual discipline of studying the weekly lectionary, I heard in that comment an echo of some ancient fundamentals, things foundational to a way of life that isn't just one day after another in the bloody, barren wilderness.

*He feeds people, with loaves and fishes, but mostly with himself. He becomes our bread, our nourishment, our cup of life—by giving himself away. By dying.*

Here's a "foundational" text for you:

**Hebrews 11:8-16** <sup>8</sup> By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to set out for a place that he was to receive as an inheritance; and he set out, not knowing where he was going. <sup>9</sup> By faith he stayed for a time in the land he had been promised, as in a foreign land, living in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. <sup>10</sup> For he looked forward to the city that has foundations (qemeli,ouj), whose architect and builder is God.

Abram and Sarai left home to go to a strange place, and more importantly for us who are grafted in through Christ as heirs of this couple, their calling was to serve as "blessing to all the families of the earth," and at this point in the story the Bible tells, blessing is a new thing, for up to now, every story has been the story of things going from bad to worse and God responding with curse—after the sin of the garden couple, the murder of the older brother, the violence that had spread over the whole earth, and the audacity of the tower-building, heaven-storming Babel-onians. But when nuking the world with water in a final attempt to solve humanity's problems with punishment, God makes a grand discovery. God sees that curse changes nothing. "Look at this," God says. "Even after taking my hardest shot, humanity remains evil in the imagination of their hearts, from their youth. I'll never do that again." (Genesis 8:21-22)

So, this couple, Abram and Sarai, are chosen as part of a new plan. They are, shall we say, earth's first chaplains. They are "agents of blessing." They are God's last hope for the world. If blessing fails, the story is over. Only one, unspeakable option remains—a last flood, this time with no survivors.

But how do you bring blessing—to anyone, much less to all the families of the earth? Eventually, of course,

Israel would say they bequeath *torah* to the world, and Christians, late-born, adopted, grafted-in heirs of Abram and Sarai, say the blessing comes in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ. But we can see even that great blessing through the lens of what God promised in Genesis.

Whenever the Bible tells us what names mean, especially when names get changed, we're given a clue to the underlying meaning in stories. With this in mind, think again about the first generations who became heirs of that that promise of God that Abram and Sarai's seed would be blessing. . .

a. In the first generation, not Ishmael, but Isaac becomes the child of blessing. Both names have symbolic meaning, but Isaac's means, "He laughs." (More onomatopoeia: "*Yitzhok!*" Can you hear the laughter?) Why is he named this? His father laughed at the promise of his and Sarai's becoming parents, of course, and so did Sarai. But that's not the laughter for which Isaac is named. Instead, at the moment of naming (21:6), the laughter is provided by God! [Genesis 21:6 Now Sarah said, "God has brought laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh with me."] Isaac is named not for laughter *at*, but for laughter *with*. He's named for the kind of laughter those men shared down in the Chilean mine. There's a huge difference between laughter *at* and laughter *with*. A world-blessing difference.

Laughter is foundational. It was for those miners, trapped in a deep, dark wilderness, a no-place place. It is for us. Laughter is perhaps our healthiest response to something we hate the most: *being wrong*. "Surprise, surprise! We weren't too old after all, Sarai!" Something that should never have happened, happened. And we were, we are, such fools!

I go around these days advocating for the revision of Maslow's hierarchy of needs. It's not food and warmth, belonging, water, or even sex that's at the top of the list of things we want and need. It's BEING RIGHT! We love that more than anything. And to know others are wrong. We'd rather be dead that proved wrong. Do you doubt this? Then try an experiment. Get married. Commit to a lifelong relationship. Holy matrimony is the best laboratory I know of for testing one's need to be right. How much sex will you forego, how many nights will you spend on the couch? How many meals will you eat alone, or in silence, proving you are right? We love being right. But in the end, we're always wrong, and about everything—which is why we pin all our hopes on the one who came into the emptiness of our crucifixion, that wrong place we all end up.

I'm also going around these days recommending a book that helps describe this foundational point. *Being Wrong: Adventures in the Margin of Error*, by Kathryn Schulz (HarperCollins, 2010). Cf. [www.beingwrongbook.com/](http://www.beingwrongbook.com/).

I can't imagine that laughter—looking at and learning from the surprising ways that we're wrong, but still part of God's intimate circle anyway—isn't a part of your "toolbox" as chaplains out there in the wilderness, or on the road to Jericho.

You want a cruciform laugh? Recall the death scene in Luke 23:42ff. One of those crucified with Jesus says, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." And Jesus responds, "Sure, friend, you and me. Let's do it. Today. Paradise, here we come!"

*Laughter is perhaps our healthiest response to something we hate the most: being wrong.*

It's gallows humor, of course, and I often wonder what the soldiers who listened nearby made of this crazy talk and how they described it for their buddies later. "I heard these two crucified guys making plans today. They've got their kingdom all set up!" But it's the truest picture I know of for depicting the church—a bunch of crucified people asking, "OK, what's our next move? Now that we're nailed, what's our plan?" As if there is a next, a future for people nailed to the wall! The gospel's grand, holy joke is that there is a future! The worst is already behind us.

I love, too, how theology of the cross makes baptized people taunt- and blasphemy-proof. People get so upset when someone mocks their symbols or holy books. But we can laugh at this. Think about it—how can you hurt a crucified person? Say mean things to him? Call her names? Once you're crucified, none of that matters.

b. In the next generation, Jacob (whose name means "he'll supplant you") becomes Israel ("the one who fights with God," and no longer with his brother, but lives—differently). This name change comes in Genesis 32: 22-33, which we just had in the lectionary this past Sunday, along with the story of the widow hounding the unjust judge. Here is part of the RELIGION that kept those miners going, and keeps us going, too, and which I have no doubt whatsoever is a critical part of your ministry. Up to this point, Jacob thinks his big battle is with his brother, whom he cheated, and who likely will wish to kill him. So Jacob sends the family ahead while he stays back, maybe to think, maybe to pray, maybe merely to see what will happen. He has no night of peace and quiet, but instead wrestles all night with a stranger. In the end, when the two have fought to a draw, Jacob says, "I will not let you go until you bless me." Only then does he realize he's been struggling with God, and even more importantly, all his life long, his real battles were with God, not his brother.

The miners down in the dark for all that time had to keep that in mind. It probably looked like the people who owned the mine were their enemies, and if they ever escaped, they'd have it out with the owners. But their struggle with God was the one that really mattered. Would that Cain had known that! He was furious with God, but he could only get his hands on God's pet, the fellow who fared better than he did. In the face of all the injustice we believe we experience, our first instinct is to lash out at those we hold responsible for our plight, the ones near enough that we can whack them a good one. Somebody has screwed me over! But it's always more complicated than it looks, and when dump on, vilify or even blow up brother Abel, we nearly always get the wrong guy. We miss our true target.

Can we get God into a headlock? Or make God know our pain and sorrow and the injustices we suffer? Come to Golgotha, and see.

It's deadly to give up hope. And much of our ministry is staying with the hopeless, refusing to give up, not letting go of God until there's blessing. In the end we must trust as did Paul, that the Spirit of God, the Spirit of the crucified Christ, will stick by us, praying for us long after we no longer have words in our wilderness and can't even pray. With sighs too deep for words, wrung from the heart of the body of Christ, of which you are the flesh and blood present there in the wilderness, the Spirit clings to the hopeless and never lets go.

- c. Finally, Judah, the son of Jacob for whom the Jewish people ultimately become named even to this day. He becomes the son of blessing because his brothers one by one discredited themselves. How did he get his name? I told this story at length back at ZION X. Briefly, Judah, whose name depicts the gesture of throwing ones hands into the air, is the one heaved up to God in thanks after Leah has failed to win her husband's love by giving him three sons Reuben, Simeon, and Levi (Genesis 29:31-35). How could a wife do better than that?

Her husband slept with her but dreamed of Rachel, and Leah knew it. She craved Jacob's love, but finally she named Judah for the act of her surrender. She'd lost. She'd learned, among other things, that you can't earn love and your children aren't your own, nor is anything else. Children, life, love—they're all gifts. And that means they're for giving away, starting with handing them back to God . . . in thanksgiving. "Judah" means, "O, give thanks!"

This, too, is part of the RELIGION those miners relied on to keep going, I'll bet. Thankfulness. Gratitude. The ability to give and to give up. It's the ability to give back to God what we have received in life—including life itself. When loved ones die, we tell stories as our way of handing back to God a precious gift. In so doing we practice thanks. We practice "Eu-

charist." Even as did our Lord, whose meals began with uplifted hands, and whose life was handed back, ironically, with hands in pretty much that same gesture. If it weren't for all those meals and moments of thanksgiving, you'd have thought that the gesture in the posture on the cross had only one meaning—pain, torture, injustice, and death. But no, we can see that it also means, "Thank God!"

*And much of our ministry is staying with the hopeless, refusing to give up, not letting go of God until there's blessing.*

## Part II

Before launching into the second part of my presentation, let me say how grateful I am to be present for the meeting at which you honor Dr. Bruce Hartung with your *Christus in Mundo* award. I've admired Bruce Hartung since I was a high school student and he was a college student in one of the Missouri Synod's old "system" schools. He was just far enough ahead of me that I and my friends looked at those "older guys" and thought, "That's what we'll be like some day." We wondered if it was still possible to have any fun at that advanced age. And, we made sure to have plenty of fun right away, in case by then it was too late. I have a different opinion of college sophomores nowadays, but I still admire Bruce Hartung and give thanks to God for all the gifts that have come to the church through him.

The thoughts I'll share today bring to mind some pieces of another favorite book, this one quite old. In Richard Lederer's, *Anguished English* (Wyrick & Company, 1987), a collection of gaffes and mixups in everything from high school essays to courtroom transcripts, there's a section called, "Lost in Translation," that contains curious directives posted around the world for the benefit of English-speaking tourists. For example, in the lobby of a Bucharist hotel a sign said, "The lift is being fixed for the next day. During that time we regret that you will be unbearable." A sign in a Paris elevator warned, "Please leave your values at the front desk." The menu in a Swiss restaurant promised, "Our wines leave you nothing to hope for."

I start with these well-intentioned but confusing signs because a goodly part of the discomfort, disillusionment, disorientation and disappearing support I mentioned hearing about as I began yesterday stems from the reality that we live in a different place than many of us, most of us perhaps, expected to inhabit and serve. We are, even in our own homeland, strangers in a strange land. Christendom is somewhere in the past. We don't live there anymore. Yes, Christians are still a majority in the world and in the U.S., but we're not alone and we

can't presume ours to be the default religion and, more importantly perhaps, the default culture.

This leads some of our contemporaries to work hard at marking the corners of their turf, saying in one way or another, "This is a Christian country (often followed by an epithet)!" They send emails that we're supposed to pass along to everyone we know that rail, for example, against the removal of "under God" from the Pledge of Allegiance on Pepsi cans that, if they bothered to check their facts, never existed. Small-time and big player culture warriors do their best to entangle the church in this enterprise.

Add to this the reality that the Lutheran churches in which most of us are credentialed—and which raised, nourished, and educated us—are among the rapidly vanishing religious groups in this country. You've heard the same demographic nightmare scenarios I have. It seems the ELCA and LCMS will both vanish by mid-century unless something drastic happens to disrupt or reverse the demographics that have been precipitating an inexorable decline for the past 30 years. I preached at the ordination of two recent, former students a few months ago, and I spoke honestly. I trust that the church will still be around to bury me, I told them, but today's young pastors may well have to conduct the funeral for the church as we know it.

Our churches are in constant slim-down and cutback mode, partly because of the world-wide economic situation, but partly because of "shrinking pains." One thing on the chopping block is ongoing support and continuing education for rostered, professional servants. I'm told that at seminaries, students are being told they can't assume they'll work in fully supported ministries. They'll have to have "day jobs" so they can support themselves as they follow their vocations as pastors, chaplains, youth ministers, or church musicians.

One solution would be to abandon Lutheran tradition for Catholicism or the Evangelical communions. At least they're not shrinking. Or, we can choose to become part of the so-called "emerging church." For many, the "emerging church" is a practice-oriented version of Christianity that focuses on working for and establishing justice. It speaks the language of "human transformation," which, so far as I can tell, is lingo for living by certain rules, drawn from the Bible, perhaps, which assist us to live according to our best instincts.

I'm not much drawn to such programs. It seems to me the Pharisees did something like that as well as anyone, and we have plenty of them around today. But I find I can never get very far in addressing what's really in and on my heart if I have to live my life lurking in the bushes waiting for someone like Jesus and his friends to pick grain on the Sabbath day, so I can jump out and scream, "Gotcha!"

Or think about this coming Sunday's gospel—parable of the Pharisee and tax collector (Luke 18:9-14). "I thank thee Lord God that I am not like other people. . .

including this miserable tax collector." This is an all-too-common picture of transformational programs and culture warriors with religion. They spend all their time and energy obsessing over other people's sins. It's said of "liberals" that they go overboard repenting of others' mistakes (environmental, etc.). "Conservatives" do the same,

*Repentant people . . . remember that our fears about these things are mostly foolish because, the truth is, it's the church's job to die, not merely by attrition, but as a sacrifice.*

only for them it's mostly other peoples' sex lives. The idea is to link up to the issues around which people in our culture are already animated, even angry, and seek to join forces. We're all addicted to that enterprise in some way or another, if for no other reason, because we don't want to die, or for our tribe and way of life to disappear.

Repentant people, as distinct from merely reactive people, or those who thrive on being RIGHT, remember that our fears about these things are mostly foolish because, the truth is, it's the church's job to die, not merely by attrition, but as a sacrifice. Our main thing is to give ourselves, our very lives, and even our institutions away! Whether we can, by the power of the Holy Spirit, do the latter instead of merely the former, makes all the difference. And it shapes our ministries.

As I think about biblical resources, habitats, and "firm foundations" available for those of us who face a wilderness sojourn after being expelled from the safety of Christendom and solvent, growing church bodies, two primary images of place come to mind, and one metaphor that lets us envision our mission.

The first image I'll paint up this morning appears in Exodus 33. The context is the Golden Calf episode, a story about coping in the absence of trusted leadership, and maybe in the absence of God as well. (The two kinds of absence always seem linked, it seems.)

**Exodus 33:7-23** <sup>7</sup> Now Moses used to take the tent and pitch it outside the camp, far off from the camp; he called it the tent of meeting. And everyone who sought the LORD would go out to the tent of meeting, which was outside the camp.

<sup>8</sup> Whenever Moses went out to the tent, all the people would rise and stand, each of them, at the entrance of their tents and watch Moses until he had gone into the tent. <sup>9</sup> When Moses entered the tent, the pillar of cloud would descend and stand at the entrance of the tent, and the LORD would speak with Moses. <sup>10</sup> When all the people saw the pillar of cloud standing at the entrance of the tent, all the people would rise and bow down, all of them, at the entrance of their tent. <sup>11</sup> Thus the LORD used

to speak to Moses face to face, as one speaks to a friend. Then he would return to the camp; but his young assistant, Joshua son of Nun, would not leave the tent.

<sup>12</sup> Moses said to the LORD, “See, you have said to me, ‘Bring up this people’; but you have not let me know whom you will send with me. Yet you have said, ‘I know you by name, and you have also found favor in my sight.’<sup>13</sup> Now if I have found favor in your sight, show me your ways, so that I may know you and find favor in your sight. Consider too that this nation is your people.”

<sup>14</sup> He said, “My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest.”

<sup>15</sup> And he said to him, “If your presence will not go, do not carry us up from here. <sup>16</sup> For how shall it be known that I have found favor in your sight, I and your people, unless you go with us? In this way, we shall be distinct, I and your people, from every people on the face of the earth.”

<sup>17</sup> The LORD said to Moses, “I will do the very thing that you have asked; for you have found favor in my sight, and I know you by name.”

<sup>18</sup> Moses said, “Show me your glory, I pray.”

<sup>19</sup> And he said, “I will make all my goodness pass before you, and will proclaim before you the name, ‘The LORD’; and I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy. <sup>20</sup> But,” he said, “you cannot see my face; for no one shall see me and live.”

<sup>21</sup> And the LORD continued, “See, there is a place by me where you shall stand on the rock; <sup>22</sup> and while my glory passes by I will put you in a cleft of the rock, and I will cover you with my hand until I have passed by; <sup>23</sup> then I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back; but my face shall not be seen.”

It’s an almost universal story. Hollywood knows it well and tells it frequently. Once upon a time there was a place where one could talk with God, face to face, like we do with our friends. Or at least one fellow could. And he could tell the rest of us what God said, and maybe even what God’s face looked like.

But even for ancient Israel, God’s chosen ones who lived in that once upon a time, those face-to-face days happened in the place called “wilderness.” As I’ve been reminding us, this was no ordinary place. Then again, it was all too ordinary.

The killing emptiness of wilderness is what Moses began to see, it seems, and why his tone changes so quickly and without warning in these oddly juxtaposed paragraphs of Exodus 33. Suddenly, Moses, the face-to-face-with-God guy, realizes exactly where he is and he wants some proof that he and the others will make it to some meaningful future, to freedom, to the promised land, whatever and wherever that is. That they have a future, that’s what he needs to know.

In his anxiety and uncertainty, Moses wants one more time to see God’s face, to have a sign, proof that he and his murmuring people will make it.

And God says, “No. I’ll tell you all about my mercy. I’ll remind you every single day that I have mercy on whom I have mercy. But you cannot see my face.” That is, you can’t get out ahead of God, where you can see what God sees, namely, the future and all that God’s promises hold, and from where you can look back and see God’s face.

*The stuff we see behind God, in God’s wake, here in history, in our time and place, through which God has already passed—that turns out to be, just as God promised, so much mercy.*

“No,” says God, “you can’t see my face. But I’ll arrange for you to see my backside, after I pass by, while you hide in the cleft of the rock and I cover your eyes with my hand. The very moment I’m past, you can look. And what you see will be enough to sustain you.”

The backside of God? The divine *derriere*? What, pray tell, is that?

The stuff we see behind God, in God’s wake, here in history, in our time and place, through which God has already passed—that turns out to be, just as God promised, so much mercy. Mercy, mercy, and mercy—it’s all over the place in God’s wake. And nearly all that mercy shows up in flesh and blood, incarnate in faces, the faces I see here in my space and time, in the gifts God gives me in those with whom it’s been my privilege to make my brief arc through space and time. People who have taught me, loved me, forgiven me, died a thousand deaths for me, taken me back again and again, hidden me in the cloaks of their mercy.

People who for me are “the cleft in the rock”—the capital-C *Cleft* in the capital-R *Rock*, that is—the people who are for me the nail-marked hands and wounded feet of the body of Christ. Face to face with you, and with so many others, I see not only God’s backside. I also know freedom right here in the wilderness. I can taste the milk and honey and know that the Lord is good. And some days my murmuring tongue even finds its rhythm, and a song breaks out. And where such songs sound, charity and love begin to happen, and there is God.

Here is God. Smack in the middle of our wilderness, where even the hills now sing, and the trees clap their hands.

There’s an image of who we are and where we are out here in the wilderness, far from the old safeties of Christendom, and maybe cut off at least partly from synodical support spigots as well. We are, even if tiny in number, Clefts in the Rock, where the lost and lonely may find

themselves hidden and held among the body of Christ, however small and mustard-seed-like.

The other image I have come to love as the habitat in which I can live and die appears in John 11, the story of the death and resurrection of Lazarus.

To my way of thinking, this is the original “emerging church” story. The church is always emerging. It always has been, and always will—from the font, and from the tomb. We are never called to RIGHTness as we are to dying, to rising, and then to dying again. The story of Lazarus’ raising, like all of John’s narratives, has many levels. On one level, it’s a miracle story, somewhat like Mark’s story of Jairus’ daughter or Luke’s about the widow’s son at Nain. But it’s deeper. Scholars have called it a story of “death in the community of eternal life.” Jesus said, “Those who believe in me will never die.” But the believers started to die, even that one known as “the disciple whom Jesus loved.” Thus, John 11 is also a story about the delayed coming of Jesus, and it teaches the faith of Martha as the antidote to doubt and bitterness over the attack of death on the community of eternal life.

This is also the story of individuals and of the whole church who have died and been called to new life. They are kinfolk to the blind man two chapters earlier, with eyes re-created from the mud, and through much trouble, confusion, and harassment, this man comes to see and to follow Christ—but at the cost of being thrown from his home and into the street, tossed, it turns out, from one family into another.

I can’t think of this story without hearing it in the voice of a liturgical drama I witnessed many times back home (directed by a late colleague) called, “And They Danced.”

This play tells the story of Lazarus’ death, the dismay and anger of Mary and Martha over Jesus’ delay in coming when their brother fell ill and they sent word, and ultimately the celebration that John’s gospel doesn’t mention, but which the family and the people of Bethany surely had, when Jesus spoke and Lazarus came out of the tomb and lived. As the play draws to its close, the cast turns to the congregation and says, “But none of this could have happened, except first Lazarus had died. There is no rising to new life except first there is dying. And only from inside the tomb do we hear the voice of Jesus call, “Lazarus, come forth!”

Here is the truth of our lives, and here, too, begins the word of good news. Sooner or later, the one in the tomb is our loved one, or you, or me, or perhaps our beloved institutions. Our only hope in that moment is the same one that Mary and Martha had, the coming of the young man who, as it happened, was on his way toward Jerusalem when the call came about Lazarus. Indeed, we must see and hear everything that Jesus said and did when he finally got to Bethany as part of that journey to Jerusalem, else we misunderstand it—and miss the real reason for dancing. Within a very few days, Jesus himself would be in a tomb, dead as an executioner’s nail, so when he called into Lazarus’ tomb, instead of shouting, “Laza-

rus, come out of there,” he might just as well have said, “Heads up, Lazarus, I’m coming in to join you!”

There is no place Lazarus or any of the rest of us could ever end up, but that this one has gone or will go there, too. And only from *inside* the tomb can we hear the crucified one call us, “Lazarus, come forth!” Yes, add your name, too.

*And it’s our only hope, that we will hear the voice from inside this tomb, and head out somewhere to die a different kind of death, the kind that comes from giving our lives away—in service, in sacrifice, in offering them up for love.*

To what does this one call us when he rouses us from our tombs, or from our grief? In the case of Lazarus, Jesus called him to a remarkably perilous journey, the one that led directly to the cross. According to John’s gospel, Jesus’ enemies also marked Lazarus for death. How strange, that Jesus would raise Lazarus from one kind of death only to get him quickly killed with another.

But that, too, is our story. And it’s our only hope, that we will hear the voice from *inside* this tomb, and head out somewhere to die a different kind of death, the kind that comes from giving our lives away—in service, in sacrifice, in offering them up for love.

That is the story of everyone whose life is bound up in Christ’s, who lives as a baptized child of God—daily dying and daily rising, only to die again in giving life away in service. Over and over again we practice. When we die, we die with Christ. When we live, we live with Christ.

But then comes a time of stumbling around in tightly-bound grave-clothes. This is much like the confusion of the blind man who now can see. How do you change your life after a lifetime of groping? How do you walk after a career of moving mummy-like? In the Lazarus story, it’s only a moment, and then Jesus bids the family members standing roundabout to take care of this fellow and his grave-clothes. In one level of John’s story, this is the pattern of neophytes and newborns to the faith—buried with Christ by baptism in to his death, and now to raised to a new life in which they will live the Christ-life, they come under the tutelage of those who will do mystagogy and teach them “the walk,” the way, or in Rabbic Hebrew, the *halakah*, of the resurrected. The one who is our way, truth, and life goes ahead to prepare our place.

This “walk” begins in the wilderness, of course, in the transition period between life and death, or is it death and life? So, notice how Jesus puts Lazarus in the care of

the community whom he charges, “Unbind him. Set this one free.” Those verbs (in Greek at least) are so familiar.

Elsewhere in John and the other gospels, this is the language of forgiveness. (λύσατε αὐτὸν καὶ ἄφετε αὐτὸν ὑπάγειν) If we translated this the way we do these words elsewhere, we’d say, “Unloose him and forgive him!”

Which means we’re also the gathering of mutual grave-cloth strippers who prepare one another for mission and ministry. Where do we go when we emerge from inside the tomb, move outside into the light of day, get our grave-clothes stripped off, and now have freedom to walk in the street? (Besides murmur, that is?)

Lazarus, we noted, goes off to die with Christ. It’s as though Jesus has said to Lazarus, “You’ve died of some silly thing like an illness? Anyone can do that. Come out of there, Lazarus. Let’s go die a *real* death. Let’s go to Jerusalem and turn things upside down and inside out. And what does that look like? John’s theology of “glorification” and death by exaltation is wonderful, but it doesn’t let us follow Lazarus closely, or watch him. So I’ll switch gospels, and move over to Matthew, which to me is the gospel for the community of the grave-cloth strippers.

To the images of “cleft in the rock” and “emerging from the tomb,” I’ll now add a third, one that describes our mission.

Matthew’s gospel is the gospel that teaches forgiveness most thoroughly, and the way that we have to learn to live in the presence of enemies. And we have plenty of them these days, including inside the church, next to us in the pews, and at the table. When we have people with whom we share church, but in whose presence, for whatever reason, the music simply stops, those are our enemies. Let’s face the truth. And we need to learn to live with our enemies, the intimate enemies with whom we can no longer sing. We must gather up all Jesus’ teachings about how we treat enemies.

We begin in Matthew 16, specifically in the scene of Peter’s confession, after the disciple has confessed Jesus as messiah and Jesus has called him blessed. Then Jesus gives Peter a mission:

**Matthew 16:13-20** <sup>18</sup> And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. <sup>19</sup> I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven. . . .”

The part of this text that I want to probe is the language about the relationship of church, Hades, and Hades’ gates. I must confess that in my younger years, I had this picture backward. Jesus founded the church on Peter’s faith (we Lutherans knew that; it wasn’t on Peter himself!). And the church, founded on that rock and sitting there quite securely, could hold up against all the attacks of Hades. The powers of hell could try to break in, but they would never succeed. We were safe in here. We’d be OK. They couldn’t wipe us out.

One of my seminary teachers, Martin Franzmann,

cleared up the picture one day. This is not the little, battered church standing up against the fearsome siege of Hades. No, it’s the other way around. Jesus commissions the church to go storm the gates of hell and promises that the gates of hell cannot withstand the attack. In other words, Jesus says to the church, “Go to hell. They can’t keep you out!”

*Matthew’s gospel is the gospel that teaches forgiveness most thoroughly, and the way that we have to learn to live in the presence of enemies.*

Where do we see this working out in Matthew’s gospel? In the teaching about forgiveness. I see it, for example, in the directions for how we do forgiveness in the Christian family:

**Matthew 18:15-20** <sup>15</sup> “If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. <sup>16</sup> But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. <sup>17</sup> If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.

As a child of the church, I watched adults go through this process many times. Indeed, “Matthew 18” seemed like a verb to me. It was something folks did, when necessary, to someone. Extensive study of this text makes me think today we partly misunderstand it. First of all, we have to look at this process in light of the parable that precedes it, the one about the shepherd who simply will not tolerate the loss of even one sheep. This is surely a picture of God and God’s economy. For God, the loss of anyone is intolerable. Finding the lost comes before everything else, which makes God seem a little crazy, risking the 99 for the sake of an irresponsible stray. (I lost my cell phone a few weeks ago and couldn’t make myself quit looking for it. I wondered if this wasn’t a kind of revelation. If God is like that, maybe God is slightly OCD about lost ones, too!)

Once we see that, we’re ready for the directions for what to do when someone is lost to us, when our community is broken, when someone is no longer brother or sister to us but something else (enemy perhaps?). We talk. But what do we say? “Point out the fault,” says the English translation. It’s not quite so simple. The verb (ἐλέγχω) can mean to convict or reprove, but the root meaning is merely to speak as convincingly as possible. It does not automatically imply a specific content. And

what kind of convincing works best when attempting to win back a brother or sister? Finger-pointing and fault-finding? Determining who's *right*?

Perhaps we can save the fault language. We can note that now a fault line separates us, and we're on separate continents. We're drifting apart. We've become enemies. But we can't let this happen. We must do whatever it takes to get us all back onto one tectonic plate. But if we go through the whole process and it doesn't work, what do we do? We treat the lost one like a tax collector and gentile. And our model for that action? If we follow the Pharisees, for example, we say, "To hell with those sinners." It's Christ's example we follow, we head out for hell ourselves. Since we couldn't make it to Christ's righteous continent, he came to ours. Better to live and die among sinners than spend eternity alone—that's Christ's way. So now, with him, we invade hell. We'll be eating in some strange restaurants for a while. Maybe you can't see hell from there, but you can smell the singed hair.

Matthew has more teachings about the size of forgiveness, and the lengths to which God's forgiveness reaches. Matthew ultimately tests these things with two figures, Peter and Judas, the lapsed one and the traitor. Matthew sets us up to see this test with that little parable in 21:28-31 in which a father asks two sons to go work in his vineyard. The first says, "Sure, I'll go." But he doesn't. The second says, "No," but he later repented and went. Then we see two flesh and blood characters play those roles. One says, "Yes, I'll go with you even if others won't, and even if I must die with you." But we know what he did, how he came to deny he even knew the bleep-bleep Jesus. Meanwhile, the other said "No, I won't go with you. In fact, I'm turning you in." But then we read:

**Matthew 27:3-10** <sup>3</sup> When Judas, his betrayer, saw that Jesus was condemned, he repented and brought back the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and the elders.

The verb for repenting here is the same one as in the parable of chapter 21. And then we hear a confession.

<sup>4</sup> He said, "I have sinned by betraying innocent blood."

Sound like a real confession to you? It's exactly what Leviticus 5 says you should do if you sin and cause great harm. Go to the priests. Confess. Pay the fine they prescribe. Then they will absolve you. But not these unfaithful priests, who cast this penitent back on himself:

But they said, "What is that to us? See to it yourself." <sup>5</sup> Throwing down the pieces of silver in the temple, he departed; and he went and hanged himself. <sup>6</sup> But the chief priests, taking the pieces of silver, said, "It is not lawful to put them into the treasury, since they are blood money." <sup>7</sup> After conferring together, they used them to buy the potter's field as a place to bury foreigners. <sup>8</sup> For this reason that

field has been called the Field of Blood to this day.

<sup>9</sup> Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah, "And they took the thirty pieces of silver, the price of the one on whom a price had been set, on whom some of the people of Israel had set a price, <sup>10</sup> and they gave them for the potter's field, as the Lord commanded me."

*It's Christ's example we follow, we head out for hell ourselves. Since we couldn't make it to Christ's righteous continent, he came to ours.*

This paragraph deserves an hour's worth of comment on its rich detail, but let me just remind us here that you can look for as long as you like and not find the text Matthew quotes in Jeremiah. It's in Zechariah. Matthew wants us to go back and check out the context of the Zechariah quote, but Matthew also doesn't want us to move on from considering Judas without pondering Jeremiah, someone who also once bought a field as a sign of hope (Jeremiah 32), a field that at the time was occupied by enemy troops. A cousin tried to cheat Jeremiah by selling him this now-worthless land. But Jeremiah knew. He bought it anyway. "Here is a place," Jeremiah declared, "that won't always be a field full of enemies. It will become a home of God's people."

Matthew also wants us to remember Jeremiah because what Jesus said of Judas, namely, that it would be better if he'd not been born (Matthew 26:24), comes straight from the book of Jeremiah (20:14-18) and that prophet's words about his own role as the one called and destined to be the traitor who handed his people over to Babylon, for in losing everything, in death and destruction, lay their only hope for salvation. As captives and exiles they would be renewed. In losing their life, they would find it. Someone had to be the traitor, and God had picked Jeremiah. He played his role, but he also despaired of his life and accused God of assaulting and overpowering him (20:7-8).

Don't forget Jeremiah when you think of Judas, Matthew whispers. They both knew hell inside out. Most likely, Judas ended up in *Gehinnom*, the NT's oldest name for "hell." It was actually the landfill outside Jerusalem. Jeremiah had more or less tossed himself there, thinking he'd wasted his life. And how could either of them know that Jesus' blood would end up all over that field the priests bought with the blood money, and splattered all over Jerusalem and Judea as well?

And what do we do when people we know become as lost as these two? We have the keys by which to release them! Neither Hades gates nor any other has the power to stand up to our word of gospel, our Spirit-given power to forgive anything and everything. Hell doesn't stand a chance if we invade.

You may or may not have the stomach for going after Judas. (Even the other gospel writers didn't.)

But there are plenty of other lost souls to go after. Let's leave the gospels for a bit and go looking for some of them. Here's another text about storming hell . . .

**1 Peter 3:18-22** <sup>18</sup> For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God. He was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit, <sup>19</sup> in which also he went and made a proclamation to the spirits in prison, <sup>20</sup> who in former times did not obey, when God waited patiently in the days of Noah, during the building of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were saved through water. <sup>21</sup> And baptism, which this prefigured, now saves you-- not as a removal of dirt from the body, but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, <sup>22</sup> who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers made subject to him.

Crucified in the flesh but alive in the spirit, Jesus goes and preaches to the spirits in prison, those who didn't make the boat in Noah's day. What would you say to all the people, over all the centuries, who didn't make "the boat?" Many have debated about what Christ must have said there. Some said he taunted the lost and condemned to heighten their suffering. Luther said he taunted the devils and made them scurry. I agree with all those who have said that if Jesus "preached," he preached the gospel. Which in his case would be this simple message: "Friends, come with me. Even now, come with me."

For us, the concern is the message of the body of Christ, sent on the same journey, to preach to those who didn't make the boat. That's our good news and how we use it.

How do we do that? What do we say? I think we also say, perhaps just as simply, "Come with me." But a few thoughts on how, where, and with what kinds of words from among those we still know in the place beyond words, along our own wilderness journeys.

Where is hell in our day? Everywhere. *Gehinnom* invades every house and every street. So many to whom you minister are out there now. I have a 45-year-old brother-in-law, a medical doctor, living in the aftermath of cancer diagnosis. He wants desperately to live and he's making himself and wife crazy with obsessive ritual behaviors and looking for magic bullets. He suffers a week of cold sweats before every, regular blood test. What can one say to someone in this wilderness? How do we say, "Come with me?" There are no words right now that can change anything. But faithfulness in the form of listening, and not trying to minimize the depths of the wilderness in which he walks, makes the wilderness, this hell, a place that's been invaded. He is not alone there.

A pastor friend back home who had a first career in the Marine Corps, and who has seen hell firsthand in ways

I surely haven't, served a first call in a congregation that couldn't pay him a full-time salary. So, he told all the local funeral homes he'd do funerals for people who don't have a pastor. He did lots of funerals in those years, sometimes two or three a week. Now he's in congregation that can pay him. But he missed doing those funerals. So, he went to a couple funeral homes in his new town with the same offer. He does fewer now, but he says this is one of

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his most meaningful ministries, even though his current congregation isn't sure what to make of this and some don't like it at all. He preaches the gospel to people who are broken, in grief, in the absence of God, in hell. The last time I talked with him he told me he'd recently buried a 16-year-old suicide from a lapsed Catholic family. A priest had refused to bury a suicide. Approximately 400 people crowded into the funeral home to attend the funeral. When it came time to say Lord's Prayer, there was near silence. No one knew it, except perhaps a few who knew it from their 12-step meetings. (They'd learned the words on the outskirts of hell.) But this pastor brought words into their wilderness. He brought the gospel. He embodied the presence of Christ in hell. He was a cleft in the rock.

Another image that comes to mind here is the beautiful, eschatological vision of Isaiah 25<sup>2</sup>, the feast at the top of the holy mountain, served while the Moabites, mired in the dungpit below, swim in our urine. We must turn that scene upside down, for it gets played out all too often in our world. With the gospel, we can do just that. We begin by asking where we would find the *crucified* Christ in such a scene. (If nothing else, remember that he's got that Moabite blood in his veins thanks to great . . . great grandmother Ruth. How many generations does it take before that doesn't matter?) Any party that includes him will be down here, where we live, in the dung pit.

Because we are a gathering of servants whose tools are mostly words—we listen to them, and we use them to speak as best we can—I have one more image for thinking about our mission to storm the gates of hell, perhaps quietly, with only faith and the Spirit's words as our "weapons."

It's not from the scriptures, but from the story of a young, Dutch, Jewish woman named Etty Hillesum, who spent the last two years of her life, 1942 and 1943,

first at Westerbork, a Nazi transit camp in the Netherlands, and finally in Auschwitz. Her memoirs, entitled *An Interrupted Life* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1983), tell of a young woman's struggle to cope with life and love and sex and parents, and ultimately with the horrors of the story that goes by the name "Holocaust." In the face of radical evil, Etty Hillesum clung to her faith, to her spirit, to her heart, to her God. Late one night, near the end of her days in the transit camp, she wrote in a diary she kept (and which remarkably, got saved):

I shall no longer write in this exercise book, I shall simply lie down and try to be a prayer. . . . I know perfectly well I am not much good to anyone as I am now. I would so love to be just a little bit better again. But I ought not to make any demands. I must let things take their course and that's what I am trying to do with all my might. 'Not my will, but Thy will be done.'

There is no hidden poet in me, just a little piece of God that might grow into poetry.

And a camp needs a poet, one who experiences life there, even there, as a bard and is able to sing about it.

At night, as I lay in the camp on my plank bed, surrounded by women and girls gently snoring, dreaming aloud, quietly sobbing and turning, women and girls who often told me during the day, 'We don't want to think, we don't want to feel, otherwise we are sure to go out of our minds,' I was sometimes filled with an infinite tenderness, and lay awake for hours letting all the many, too many impressions of a much too long day wash over me, and I prayed, 'Let me be the thinking heart of these barracks,' And that is what I want to be again. The thinking heart of a whole concentration camp. I lie here so patiently and now so calmly again, that I feel quite a bit better already. (pp. 190-191)

A camp poet. The thinking heart of a barracks. One in whom there is a little piece of God that might grow into poetry. That is what a bearer of gospel is. A thinking heart, lying awake, filled with an infinite tenderness. Listening. This alone is an assault on hell, to listen with all one's powers to another's life, heart, and soul. And out of that tenderness, the "little piece of God" must grow into a poem, into a story which will transform all of the stories of heartache and death into the story that ends in doxology. That is, the word-bearer fashions a "poem" which is the word of God, but which grows out of faith in the One who clings to us when we, too, have lost our grip and lie in our own beds of sorrow, hopelessness, or cheap excuses.

Then the camp poet, the bard, tells the story and sing the song that is the word of God which will transform the lives and hearts of the community, the story of her own sojourn in hell, from inside which he heard the call, "Lazarus, come forth!" And it links that story to

the story of the heart of God, exposed and vulnerable, in the "camp" called Calvary. In the mingling of these two stories comes the "sweet swap." We trade stories with Christ, and God's word is made flesh in you.

A chaplain, a counselor, even a preacher, is not so much a prophet as a priest, one who offers up his or her own life and story to God, who speaks the thankful word which is the sacrifice of life, the offering back to God for the sake of love the life received as gift.

*And out of that tenderness, the "little piece of God" must grow into a poem, into a story which will transform all of the stories of heartache and death into the story that ends in doxology.*

But sometimes we wonder, don't we, what has become of the life we have given away, what has become of all the words we have woven into the story, what has become of all of the heart we have exposed as God's heart, trying to make the poetry grow. What has become of a career in the ministry? I would remind you of another piece of poetry, full of promise for anybody who serves as one of God's incarnate words scattered all through hell. It is a word from a camp poet who listened in the camp that was Babylon, so far from God that the people couldn't even sing the songs of Zion there:

As the rain and the snow come down from heaven,  
and return not thither but water the earth,  
making it bring forth and sprout. . .  
So shall my word be that goes forth from my mouth,  
it shall not return to me empty. (Isaiah 55:10-11)

Soon we shall return again to the barracks, to the camps, to the world of our lives and work to be thinking heart, camp poet, word of God. We know not what the future of any one of our stories will be. It is reported that when Etty Hillesum, whose story I shared with you moments ago, was loaded onto the train from the transit camp to Auschwitz, she threw from the window of the train a postcard addressed to a friend. A farmer found it and mailed it. It had a one-line message: "We have left the camp singing" (*Interrupted Life*, pp. xii-xiii).

It is a gift given to camp poets that they have a song to sing. The one called Psalm 31 comes to mind. It's the one Luke says Jesus sang with his last breaths. ("Into your hands, I commend my spirit," a line from a lovely evensong taught to children by Jewish moms as a bedtime prayer even in Jesus' day. It was ready when he needed it.) Maybe I should have planned to have us sing now, but I didn't. We'll sing tonight, and tomorrow

before we break company. At then at the end, imagine the dismissal that comes at the end of so many of our gatherings, like, “Go in peace. . .” How about this, that just this once, we say to one another as we part, “Go to hell, serve the Lord!”

Thanks be to God.

## Notes

1. “In this controversy the main doctrine of Christianity is involved; when it is properly understood, it illumines and magnifies the honor of Christ and brings to pious consciences the abundant consolation that they need.” (Kolb & Wengert, pp. 120-121)
2. Isaiah 25:6-11 <sup>6</sup> On this mountain the LORD of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines, of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear. <sup>7</sup> And he will destroy on this mountain the shroud that is cast over all peoples, the sheet that is spread over all nations; <sup>8</sup> he will swallow up death forever. Then the Lord GOD will wipe away the tears from all faces, and the disgrace of his people he will take away from all the earth, for the LORD has spoken. <sup>9</sup> It will be said on that day, Lo, this is our God; we have waited for him, so that he might save us. This is the LORD for whom we have waited; let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation. <sup>10</sup> For the hand of the LORD will rest on this mountain. The Moabites shall be trodden down in their place as straw is trodden down in a dung-pit. <sup>11</sup> Though they spread out their hands in the midst of it, as swimmers spread out their hands to swim, their pride will be laid low despite the struggle of their hands.

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# Plenary Session

I believe this will continue to be a challenging time for Lutherans globally around how the past is remembered and used. Let our contribution be a deep respect for the past—a remembering—as a path to renewed intimacy with one another through a common faith in Jesus Christ.

Luke 24:1-53

Mark 8:31

2 Timothy 1:1-14

2 Corinthians 5:16-21

It's very good to be with you. I greet you in Jesus' name and on behalf of my colleagues in leadership with the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America.

I come mostly to say words of thanks, just as you've been thanked by other speakers today for the extension of the body of Christ you are in your specialized calls. As Dr. Niedner mentioned and I know, sometimes you feel disconnected from, disregarded by and lacking a sense of affirmation from ELCA leadership. I hope my presence expresses some of that appreciation that we always have had, but that maybe you don't always hear.

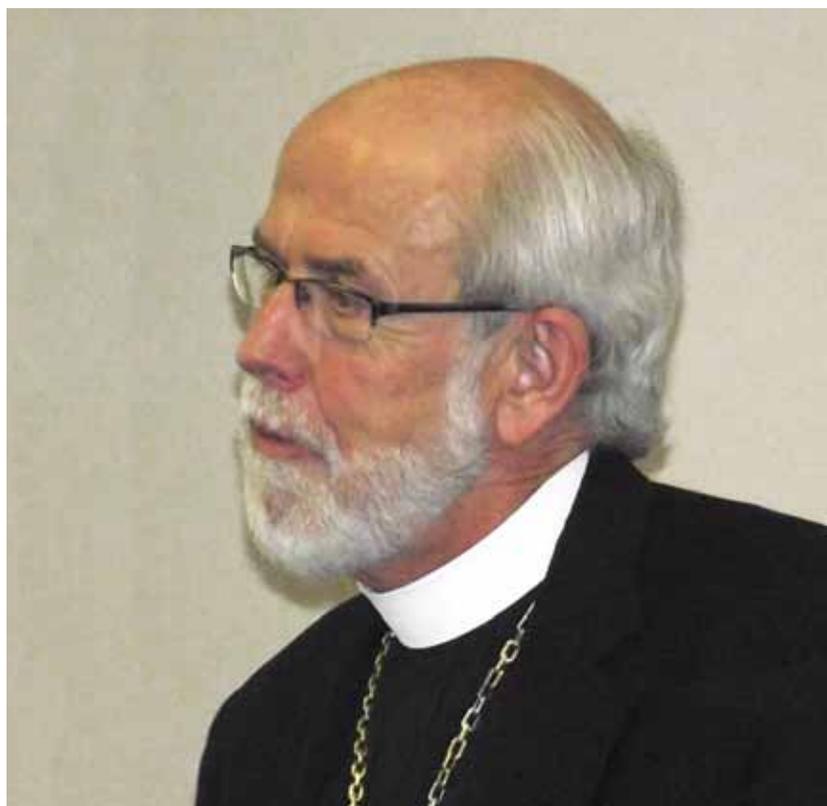
In an exceptional lecture called "Pontiff, Prophet, Poet: What Kind of Leaders Will We Require?" John Thomas, former General Minister and President of the United Church of Christ, asks: "Is the pressing question today 'what kinds of churches need pastors?' or is it 'what kind of mission needs leaders?'" He argues it is the latter when we think of mission as "*missio Dei*" – God's work in and for the sake of the world. He goes on to describe the kinds of leaders we need.

## Pontiffs, Prophets and Poets

We will need leaders who are pontiffs. A pontiff is a bridge-builder. Bridge-builders don't impose uniformity; they seek to enable different communities to become a diverse community.<sup>1</sup> Right now in our relationship with the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod, we need bridge builders. You stand as pontiffs in that relationship, and we need pontiffs.

I want you who are in the LCMS to know of our commitment in the ELCA to continue all the ways that we witness to Christ and serve our neighbor, as we have done so well in the past. It's my prayer that we continue to work in response to fill the need with Lutheran World Relief, Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service, Lutheran Services in America, through chaplaincy, through Lutheran Disaster Response and through military chaplaincy.

I do not believe the world needs to witness more fragmentation in the body of Christ when the world itself has enough fragmentation. It needs to witness the unity of faith amidst the diversity of its expression. So thank



you for being pontiffs.

The second characteristic that President Thomas mentions is that God's mission today needs prophets. Prophets who are truth-tellers in an age of massive deception. I felt in Dr. Shauna Hanna's Bible study that we were witnessing a prophet as Thomas describes it. I want to read Thomas' description of a prophet and then I think

*I do not believe the world needs to witness more fragmentation in the body of Christ when the world itself has enough fragmentation.*

you'll concur with me that we were blessed by that prophetic voice today: "Prophets are truth-tellers, they discern truth for and within the community of faith. . . We will require leaders schooled in the theological disciplines and practiced in the spiritual disciplines lest the

truth that is proclaimed be merely warmed-over political agenda or social ideology with a pious veneer.”<sup>2</sup>

And now here’s what made me think of you, Shauna: “The capacity to read Scripture critically and teach the Bible thoughtfully, to think and speak as theologians informed by the richly diverse traditions of the church through the ages, to pray and to meditate, alone and corporately, to listen to God and particularly to the oppressed and to those who are vulnerable—these disciplines are critical to resisting the deceiving and distorting voices that shout from beyond the church and that whisper within”<sup>3</sup>

The third characteristic needed for God’s mission today, he said, are not just pontiffs and prophets, but poets. In Dr. Niedner, we experienced leadership of a poet. Thomas says, “Poets, literal poets in some cases, but perhaps in most cases leaders equipped to use language and symbol, liturgy and song, ritual and sacrament, silence and dance to help us imagine a world that is more than marketplace, to claim a life that is profoundly connected and communal to see the world and one another as mystery to be worshiped rather than objects to be consumed.”<sup>4</sup>

Thomas also says, “Poets and liturgists are today’s evangelists, who enable us to see the improvisational God revealed in Jesus Christ and lure us into the company of those no longer satisfied with consuming or with living as competitive strangers to one another.”<sup>5</sup>

So thank you for letting me be in the presence of leaders who are pontiffs, prophets and poets. Listening to Dr. Niedner, I watched what I was going to say in a more linear way be magnified in a poetic way, as he said, “onto a canvas.”

### Figural Narrative

So I’m just going to remind you of what you already know about the theology that I think is shaping your ministry, hearts and minds. And these are just really fragments of thoughts from along the way about what I see—and maybe wonder with you about—as key theological elements in past frontiers in specialized ministry. And again, this was exemplified in all of Dr. Niedner’s speech.

I think we need to keep asking ourselves, what is the figural narrative that is woven throughout our ministry? If you read philosophers, they declare that we are living in post-modernity. I think the end of modernity has been prematurely announced. Maybe we’re in trans-modernity because we’re not out of modernity. But one of the descriptors used by philosophers of post-modernity is the absence of and disparaging of any meta-narratives.

At most, you have micro-narratives—your own little fragmented story—and it’s a highly localized narrative. It tends to be a very turned-inward-upon-self narrative that is self-described individually, tribally or communally. And so there is disparaging of any meta-narratives, and yet we can’t be people of faith absent meta-narrative.

As I have accompanied and we have benefited from pastors in specialized care ministry—and I bet every one of us here has both offered and been the recipient of your ministries—I always want to ask, “What’s the meta-narrative?” You’ve been trained in the narratives of psychology. You’ve been trained in many meta-narratives that you

*The figural preacher—or I would say, the figural pastoral counselor—is like a figure skater whose sermons are practiced movements to the pattern figure of the cross.*

incorporate, but as I’ve heard Dr. Niedner speak, and as I believe so deeply myself, if the paschal mystery is not the meta-narrative, then we have forsaken the heart of our call and our witness to the Christian gospel.

In “Seven Working Assumptions for Preaching in a Missional Church,”<sup>6</sup> Edwin Searcy presents seven working assumptions for preaching in a missional church that also apply to the ministry of pastoral care.

In this genre of preaching for a missional church, the preacher proclaims the truth of an alternative way of figuring things out. The Cruciform pattern of Good Friday, Holy Saturday and Easter Sunday provides the coherent narrative that is rehearsed in sermon, in liturgy, in all aspects of the congregation’s life, and I would say in all aspects of your ministry. This movement from Good Friday’s aching loss through Holy Saturday’s forsaken absence to the astonishing newness of Easter day stands in stark contrast to the dominant figural narratives of our culture of satiation and self-reliant success.

In other words, the Church’s testimony is pre-figured. The figural preacher—or I would say, the figural pastoral counselor—is like a figure skater whose sermons are practiced movements to the pattern figure of the cross.

Last week we experienced a layoff of 65 staff in Chicago, plus seven from our Mission Investment Fund and another five who will be called home as global mission personnel. How do you live in the midst of that deep loss if you don’t live in the figural narrative of God present in, with, and under the mystery of God, of Christ’s death and the promise of his resurrection?

In the midst of our layoff of those colleagues, another colleague, James Nelson, a very experienced hiker, went on a five-day solo hike in the Colorado mountains. He didn’t return when he was expected, and that began a massive search with some of the best rescue teams trained in the Colorado mountains with helicopters and dogs and on foot.

As James’ fiancé, Amber, who works with us as well, his father, mother and sister began to gather at the rescue center station, the chief of the rescue squad asked if he could call a chaplain. They indicated yes and he said,

"Would you mind if he were Lutheran?"

Well, he called the local ELCA pastor, who also works as a chaplain with the rescue squad. He became the presence with them through the three days of the search that they ultimately had to call off because they found absolutely no evidence of James anyplace along that 26-mile trail or among the steep rocks that he was going to climb.

Pastor Scott could be present because of the figural narrative of the paschal mystery. He was being called to be the presence of God in Christ with those who were experiencing absolutely aching loss and an excruciating sense of forsaken absence, and yet—in the midst of that—could proclaim the astonishing newness of God in Christ, who gives life in the midst of death and forsakenness.

### Basic Chords

As many other narratives beckon and call you to become central, I hope that you keep the paschal mystery as the figural narrative of your ministries. Where Christ is present, your presence is an extension of God. The Gospel is a literal narrative that can be lived through Luke, chapter 24, where Jesus rises from the tomb, appears to his disciples, and ascends into heaven.

My unfulfilled dream from college on is that I could play the blues like Lazy Bill Lucas and have B.B. King backing me up on the guitar. Lazy Bill Lucas was then about 80 years old. He was a blind blues player who played in clubs in the Cedar Riverside area of Minneapolis, where Augsburg students shouldn't go. But Lazy Bill could play the blues like no one I have known.

I can't play the piano or the guitar, but I do know this much: if you're going to play the blues, you first need to learn the chords before you can do the riff, before you can jam. If you don't return to the chords and all you're doing is riffing and jamming, pretty soon you may be entertaining yourself, but no one else will be drawn into the music. I am afraid our communication about this church sometimes is heard by the people both in it and on the outside as noisy riffs that leave them lost and disinterested because we've lost the capacity to know and return to the basic chords.

When we are busy with the riffing and improvising of our lives, we may not hear to trust the base chords of God's grace and God's love. But God does not abandon God's creation, bending low and meeting us where we are in the bedlam and beauty, the chaos and creativity, and the suffering and rejoicing of being human.

Mark 8:31 says, "Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again" (NRSV).

In Luke 13:18-21, Jesus reminds us that the Kingdom of God is like a mustard seed, like yeast (NRSV).

In John we hear, I am the light of the world. I am the bread of life. I am the Resurrection and the life. I am the Shepherd of the sheep (NRSV).

What are the base chords in your ministry as a chaplain? Remembering and reconciliation are central theological themes in ministry. Much of chaplaincy occurs in times of trauma and tragedy, when people feel isolated, anxious, terrified of the future, disconnected from community. Memories can be painful but we remember for the sake of re-membering. Remembering is in service of re-connecting, meaning not just to escape or condemn our present, but to draw us closer to another in the life of Christ's community, the church.

[PLEASE NOTE: A portion of the bishop's presentation was not recorded. It begins again below.]

*As many other narratives beckon and call you to become central, I hope that you keep the paschal mystery as the figural narrative of your ministries.*

### Transformation and Inclusion

We're not of one mind in this church. And then people hold with great sensibility and authority interpretation their understandings of the place of gay and lesbian people in the church. But what has irritated me most is those who have left saying that the ELCA forsook the gospel of repentance and transformation for a gospel of radical inclusion.

I don't understand that bifurcation of the gospel, particularly as Paul described it to the Corinthians. Just listen to this and help me understand how you separate a gospel of transformation from a gospel of radical inclusion: "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 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" (2 Corinthians 5:16-18, NRSV).

That's about as radical a gospel of transformation as you will ever hear, right? Then Paul goes on: "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" (2 Corinthians 5:18-19, NRSV).

That's about as radical a gospel of inclusion as one can come up with: the whole creation reconciled to God through Christ. Paul goes on, "[A]nd 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" (2 Corinthians 5:19-20, NRSV). Entrusted to you is both this radical gospel of transformation, since you are an ambassador for Christ, and this gospel of radical inclu-

sion, since that message has been entrusted to us. So our remembering is for the sake of reconciliation.

At the Saint Paul Area Synod, the staff was hopelessly stuck one day. We used a Jewish psychotherapist four times a year to keep us healthy. (By the way, any system that thinks the lead person should be the one keeping it healthy—you all know this, but too many lead staff people think that their job is to keep the staff healthy, when they're usually the cause of the incident.) Most of the pastors in the synod that wanted calls were absolutely irritated with us that we hadn't produced calls for them, as if the district and the synod are the employment offices for the clergy unions. We also had several conflicted congregations in which we were involved in resolving their conflict. We weren't doing well.

Our Jewish psychotherapist looked at us and said, "This is probably not appropriate for me, a Jew, to ask you Lutherans, but do you people believe in the grace of God or don't you?" [Laughter]

And then she did something interesting. She said that she wanted us to go off for twenty minutes and think back over our life experiences, and upon what experiences we might draw to give us some wisdom, encouragement and insight for going forward together in a difficult time.

When we came back after twenty minutes and started sharing the memories of those life experiences, we learned about each other's life stories in ways we had never taken the time to learn. Then we suddenly realized that in the collective memory of the staff was a great, rich wisdom reservoir upon which we could draw both insight and courage for getting through a difficult time. It was remembering for the sake of reconciliation. It was remembering for the sake of finding a way through that would be healing, not dividing.

I remember a story told to me by Phyllis Anderson, president of Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary. She, her husband and children were backpacking in Norway. They were above the timberline and had gone off the trail to pitch a tent for the night. In the morning, they awakened to fog so dense they could not find the path. Calm gave way to anxiety. They began searching for something that would reassure them that they were not lost, something that would point the way for them. They finally came upon a pile of stones, a cairn. Someone had gathered scattered stones and had piled them up so they could become a marker, orienting those who were lost, searching or simply needing a reminder that they were still on the path.

A cairn—stones once scattered, now gathered, become like living stones. "Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people. Once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy (1 Peter 2:10, NRSV). [L]ike living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house" (1 Peter 2:5, NRSV). Scattered stones, gathered in baptismal waters, become a cairn, a marker, pointing the way. A cairn can also be a monument or a memo-

rial—in a sense, inviting the ones standing in its presence into a life beyond theirs, into a time, a story, that transcends the present moment and narrative of their lives.

Could that possibly be an image of the vocation of chaplains? A cairn of living stones, Christ the cornerstone, a marker, and a living memorial?

*God's promise, God's invitation to life defined not by lamenting, but by faith. A life of faith marked by remembering.*

### Communal Lament and Joy

This is very much a part of your ministry, but the interplay and the inseparable dance between lament and joy are expressions of Christian goodness. I don't think we do particularly well with either one as Christians. It's often said of us as Lutherans that we could grab despair out of the jaws of joy at any moment. But I'm not sure we do any better with lament, either, especially public lament.

Emily Townes is an ethicist who has done a sermon on the book of Joel that Cynthia Moe-Lobeda, a Lutheran ethicist has quoted: "Communal lament is the assembly crying out in distress to the God in whom it trusts. . . . Deep and sincere communal lament . . . names problems, seeks justice, and hopes for God's deliverance. Lament . . . forms people; it requires them to give name and words to suffering."<sup>7</sup> But there's another word for us, a word from God for us who are wondering if God hears our lament. God's promise, God's invitation to life defined not by lamenting, but by faith. A life of faith marked by remembering.

Listen to Paul writing to Timothy, "I remember you constantly in my prayers night and day. Recalling your tears, . . . I am reminded of your sincere faith, a faith that lived first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice and now, I am sure, lives in you" (2 Timothy 1:3-6 NRSV). God's invitation is to remember. So what is the nature of our remembering these days in our calls to servant leadership? Remembering often is infected by the virus called nostalgia. So remembering becomes a way of escaping the harsh realities of the present. Remembering becomes a nostalgic longing for an idealized past that more than likely never existed. Such nostalgia becomes a buffer against living, engaging in service and witness in the present while anticipating God's promised future.

For others, the past holds an enculturation of the Christian faith that serves as an idealized model that must be imposed on all Christians today. The reverse side of the coin is the past as the point of reference for our reactivity that condemns any and all impurity and error and—yes—oppression in earlier times and in so doing rejects all of the past. It matters not whether this enculturation is some supposed consensus of the apostolic age

or the confessional orthodoxy of 1580 or the immigrant pieties of our 19th century ancestors.

When viewed in this way, the past functions like a cold, hard stone of judgment and condemnation, rather than as a living stone, a life-giving witness built upon the foundation of Jesus Christ, the cornerstone.

Listen to how differently remembering functions in the letter to Timothy, “[W]hen I remember you constantly in my prayers night and day. Recalling your tears, I long to see you so that I may be filled with joy” (2 Timothy 1:3-4 NRSV). Such remembering is in service of re-union, or re-membering within the body of Christ. This is a very different way of remembering.

So in these days when the teachings and practices of the past are being brought back to our collective memory, we will serve each other and the body of Christ well by recognizing how such remembering the past, such living memory, can function not just to escape or condemn, but to draw us closer to one another in the life of Christ and life in Christ.

I really believe that’s what we as the ELCA are called to do. I believe this will continue to be a challenging time for Lutherans globally around how the past is remembered and used. Let our contribution be a deep respect for the past—a remembering—as a path to renewed intimacy with one another through a common faith in Jesus Christ. Yes, to remember is to be renewed and remembered in the mind of Christ is to be recalled to one life in Christ.

Our remembering is to be re-minded in the sense of Philippians 2, “If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. ... Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 2: 1-2, 5 NRSV).

You must hear your own call in this. But my question today is, “Why are we not standing in the public square weeping over Jerusalem today?”

My first call was in public housing in North Minneapolis, a community of 3,800 people who lived in poverty; we lived in the church building. That community taught me how communal lament and communal joy form a people of faith and how that shapes their public witness.

Every Sunday morning in the narthex we had two big posters on tripods. One said, “In pain.” One said, “In joy.” When you entered, you listed your pains and your joys. And part of the offering—which wasn’t very bountiful with dollars—was to carry forth the joys and the pains of the community that became the intercessions of the day.

The people were invited to pray and, that literally became communal lament that named and gave form to our communal suffering. But rolling throughout those laments were profound experiences of joy, as the writer of Hebrews talks about, “[l]ooking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that

was set before him endured the cross” (Hebrews 12:2, NRSV). As Dr. Niedner said, “Joy that is born out of the wonder and the giftedness of life.”

Joseph Sittler once said this about grace: “What I am appealing for is an understanding of grace that has the magnitude of the doctrine of the Holy Trinity. The grace of God is not simply a holy hypodermic whereby my sins are forgiven. It is the whole giftedness of life, the wonder of life which causes me to ask questions that transcend the moment.”<sup>8</sup>

*Let our contribution be a deep respect for the past—a remembering—as a path to renewed intimacy with one another through a common faith in Jesus Christ.*

I think we’ve lost something in the Lutheran Christian witness when we’ve lost something of the wonder of God’s grace in the giftedness of life that frees us to ask questions that transcend the moment. But Luther taught parents to teach their children the core of the faith and then to ask, “What does this mean?” He understood that grace frees us to ask questions that transcend the moment. We just need to ask if we are a witness to one another and to the world as Lutherans right now. Are we hearing the wonder of God’s grace in Christ, freeing us to ask questions, or is it more that we are making allegations and accusations about and toward one another?

There was a popular bumper sticker recently. It said, “The Bible says it, I believe it, that settles it.” One ELCA pastor’s guerilla warfare was to go around parking lots with a magic marker and change the last line: “The Bible says it, I believe it, that unsettles it.” [Laughter]

I had a Jewish friend who was a tour guide instructor, and I used him in confirmation instruction. He said that he never understood how Christians approach the meaning of the sacred scriptures. He said that, as a Jew, he would go to the scriptures, assuming there will be more questions than answers, and this will put him on a search of the community. He would go to the rabbis, the Talmud and the teachings to explore those questions. He said, “You Christians seem to come to the scriptures with all of your questions, even those that were never comprehended by the biblical writers, and you manage to get them to give you your answer.” That’s the wonder of grace.

### Fear, Forgiveness and Freedom

The last thing I want to talk about today is fear, forgiveness and freedom. You know all about that. You probably have ministry as much at the locus of anxiety-ridden culture in lives as anybody. I keep thinking of the biblical witness, how God had to send messengers into the midst

of fear simply to say, “Do not be afraid.”

How much of your ministry is to be those angels? And why is that? Because unless God sent messengers to push back the walls of anxiety, God didn't have space to do much. Every time God was going to do something radical, it was preceded by God having to send folks saying, “You're not going to be ready for this if you're turned in on yourselves over your anxieties. So let's push a little of that back and give you some space to work with Mary here.”

So Gabriel said, “Fear not. You're about to hear something that will give you a major anxiety attack, but we'll push that back, and then we have news for you. You're going to be the mother of our Lord.”

You know those examples and can add more. Then how much of your ministry is to give God space?

Walter Brueggemann says that fear does three things to us: it turns us inward, making us preoccupied with ourselves; it makes us distrustful of others, especially those in leadership; and finally makes us downright anti-neighborly toward others, especially those most different from us. Yet, into a culture and individual lives consumed by fear you come with the word *forgiveness* and the word *freedom*, into which the Holy Spirit brings, creates, and sustains faith. It's really the confidence of faith that you bring, and the Holy Spirit creates the gospel.

I think in an anxious culture, fundamentalism becomes hugely attractive, and we have to be aware of how seductive it is. Listen to Douglas John Hall in *Bound and Free: A Theologian's Journey*, “Fundamentalism, whatever the origins of the term, has come to mean a position of such exactness and certitude that those embracing it—or, more accurately, those embraced *by* it—feel themselves delivered from all the relativities, uncertainties, indefiniteness, and transience of human existence. They are provided, they feel, with a firm foundation—a *fundamentum*—greater than their own finitude, greater than any observations of any of the sciences, greater than the collective wisdom of the race.” Then Hall reminds us, “God does not meet our need for security only with a simple refusal and rebuff. God offers us an alternative to certitude. It is called trust. God reveals Godself as one who can be trusted. Certitude is denied; confidence is made possible. Consider that word: *confidence*. Literally, in the Latin, it means living with (*con*) faith (*fide*).”<sup>10</sup> Hall concludes, “Now faith is a living thing—it is a category of the present. It is not a once-for-all accomplishment. It is not a possession, like a Visa card, that some have and others don't. It is an ongoing response to God, to the world, to life.”<sup>11</sup> In other words, faith is the alternative to the certainty of fundamentalism.

## Ecology

The last image I want to give you is the metaphor of ecology to help us understand the church today. If Paul used

the image of the body of Christ, I think ecology works very well today. But the church is an ecology of interdependent ecosystems that's predicated upon the viability and sustainability of life within the ecosystems. This is determined finally on the basis of its interdependence with the rest of the ecology.

The ELCA, which is perplexing to some, has chosen to define ourselves first on the basis of our relatedness to others in the body of Christ, rather than what sets us apart. From our foundation in the late 1980s, we adopted the statement of ecumenism, believing that the Lutheran Confessions are the best proposal Lutherans

*Every time God was going to do something radical, it was preceded by God having to send folks saying, “You're not going to be ready for this if you're turned in on yourselves over your anxieties.”*

could make to preserve the unity of the Western church. When we come to our full communion partners, we begin with the Confessions. The move toward these relationships is first and foremost to define ourselves on our relatedness to others in the body of Christ, and then on our distinctiveness.

We have six full communion partners now. We take our ecumenical and global relationships within the body of Christ very seriously because we, as the ELCA, are one ecosystem within the ecology of the one holy Catholic and Apostolic church. And we know enough about the interdependence of ecosystems within an ecology to know that the body of Christ will not thrive if we think we are the sum total of that body and turn inward upon our own preservation as the ELCA.

Now, why do I want to go here with you? I'm not a scientist but I've learned that ecotones are those areas where two ecosystems come up against each other. The ecosystem of a forest comes up against the ecosystem of the plains, and sometimes—where there's been a forest fire or damage—there's this rupture of the ecotone where these two ecosystems come together.

Often it's in the ecotone that new life forms emerge. The image I have of pastoral counseling in the specialized ministries in which you are engaged, is that you're often present at ecotone places, where people are coming out of one ecosystem of their culture, their language or their faith, and they're suddenly finding themselves up against the other.

I love the time I spent in Brooklyn at the Lutheran Medical Center. They have one chapel where Jews, Christians and Muslims can pray in the same hospital. This chaplaincy is done where people are encountering

ecosystems that are foreign to their own, yet it's often right there among the new immigrants where you come to present and proclaim the good news of new life. New life emerges, and that's the image I have of the work that you are called to do.

Thank you.

## Notes

1. John Thomas, *Pontiff, Prophet, Poet: What Kind of Leaders Will We Require? A presentation to the United Church of Christ Annual Consultation in San Antonio, Texas, February 20, 2002*; p.5. Copyright © 2011 Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA). All rights reserved. This copyright notice must appear on all copies and reproductions. Copies may be produced for distribution within the ELCA by ELCA affiliated organizations.
2. *Ibid.*, 5.
3. *Ibid.*, 6.
4. *Ibid.*, 7.
5. *Ibid.*, 7.
6. Edwin Searcy, *Seven Working Assumptions for Preaching in a Missional Church*, (University Hill Congregation; Vancouver, British Columbia) 2010.
7. Cynthia D. Moe-Lobeda, *Public Church for the Life of the World* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, Publishers, 2004) 68-69.
8. Joseph Sittler, *Gravity and Grace: Reflections and Provocations*, (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1986) 14.
9. Douglas John Hall, *Bound and Free: A Theologians Journey* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, Publishers, 2005) 100.
10. *Ibid* 100, 102.
11. *Ibid* 102.

*St. Paul, Minnesota, and was a Merrill Fellow at Harvard Divinity School in 1979.*

*From 2003 until 2010, he was president of the Lutheran World Federation, a position he held concurrently with his position as presiding bishop of the ELCA. Serving with this global communion of Lutheran churches, Bishop Hanson has traveled widely throughout the world, sharing a confident hope in God's promises and a vision of the joyful freedom in Christian community and mission.*

*Hanson is widely known as a leader with an evangelical passion and imagination who embraces the Christian tradition, the Christian community, and the world with both generous goodwill and thoughtful insight. He has been an articulate advocate for the renewal of the church's preaching and public voice, for the strengthening of ecumenical and inter-religious relationships, and for reconciliation and justice in society, with attention especially to those who live with poverty and discrimination.*

*Since being elected presiding bishop, he has received several honorary degrees, including Doctor of Humane Letters from Augsburg College, Wittenberg University, and Grand View University, Doctor of Humanities from Capital University, Doctor of Divinity from Lenoir-Rhyne College, Wartburg Theological Seminary, Susquehanna University, Wartburg College, and The Academy of Ecumenical Indian Theology and Church Administration.*

*He is the author of Faithful Yet Changing, the Church in Challenging Times and Faithful and Courageous, Christians in Unsettling Times both from Augsburg Fortress, Publishers.*

*Married to Ione (Agrimson), they are the parents of Aaron, Alyssa, Rachel, Ezra, Isaac and Elizabeth, and grandparents to Naomi, Kingston, Sam, Danielle, and Sophia. Before moving to Chicago, Ione was the director of social work at Minneapolis and St. Paul Children's Hospitals.*

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*In August 2001, the Churchwide Assembly of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) elected Mark S. Hanson to serve as presiding bishop.*

*Before being elected presiding bishop, he served as bishop of the Saint Paul Area Synod (3H). He had been elected to serve a second term in Saint Paul earlier that same year.*

*Prior to being elected synod bishop, he served as pastor of three Minnesota congregations: Prince of Glory Lutheran Church, Minneapolis; Edina Community Lutheran Church, Edina, Minn., and University Lutheran Church of Hope, Minneapolis.*

*Born in Minneapolis on December 2, 1946, Hanson graduated from Augsburg College with a B.A. in sociology. He was a Rockefeller Fellow at Union Theological Seminary, New York, New York, and received a Master of Divinity degree there in 1972. He also attended Luther Seminary,*

# Bible Study

I Thessalonians is a letter sent by Paul for the purposes of encouraging, reminding, affirming, encouraging and thanking; all things that point to a particular ecclesiology with Jesus' death and resurrection as its foundation.

One of our firmest foundations is scripture.

So often we, meaning leaders in the church, read the bible

- for the sake of preaching, or
- for the sake of finding a text for a devotion that will console those who suffer,
- or for leading bible study.

One of our occupational hazards is forgetting that God's word does not just travel through us to others, but is also for us.

For these two sessions I am hopeful that you will hear God's word for you without anxiety of having to translate that for another setting. [If that starts to happen, let it happen.]

If I have understood your situation correctly,

1. **We need a word** that recognizes its hearers might be experiencing a shift in social environment where calls are lived out.
2. **We need a word** that recognizes that this shift has precipitated a squeeze of some sort as a result of religious diversity.
3. What part of scripture might provide a word of encouragement in this situation?
4. What part of scripture might help sustain courage so that the edginess/the radicality of the Christian message might not be compromised? [don't say- concerned about what they experience as social pressure to "water down" what they believe]
5. **We need a word** that urges confidence in handling/managing those who are suspicious of or intolerant of a particularly Lutheran expression of belief and action and reflection. [don't say (later move to caring for these!)for later- this is where 1 Thess falls short]

With the help of your conference organizers, I have come to understand that this is possibly your situation.

Where in scripture might there be word that can speak to the particularity of your contexts? Well, all over. But I had to pick something.

Here these words from Paul's first letter to the **Thessalonians: (3:2)** which is also God's word to you: ". . . we sent [Timothy,] our [brother and] co-worker for God in proclaiming the gospel of Christ, to **strengthen** and **encourage** you for the sake of your faith, so that no one would be shaken by these persecutions. Indeed, you yourselves know that this is what we are destined for. In



fact, when we were with you, we told you beforehand that we were to suffer persecution; so it turned out, as you know. For this reason, when I could bear it no longer, I sent to find out about your faith; I was afraid that somehow the tempter had tempted you and that our labor had been in vain."

*One of our occupational hazards is forgetting that God's word does not just travel through us to others, but is also for us.*

And from the **4<sup>th</sup> chapter (9-12)**: "Now concerning love of the brothers and sisters, you do not need to have anyone write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love one another; [and indeed you do love all the brothers and sisters throughout Macedonia.] But we urge you, beloved, to do so more and more, to aspire to live quietly, to mind your own affairs, and to work with your hands, as we directed you, so that you may behave properly towards outsiders and be dependent on no one."

(that was just a sneak peak)

How could it be that this is a living word for you? How

could it be that a letter sent from someone we will never meet, to a group of people we will never meet, in a place where many of us will never visit, in an era that none of us can get back to . . . is the living word of God for us, here, now?

1. **Similarities** - In this case it is a starting point – when your situations and the theme of the conference were described to me, I thought, Paul would have a word for these brothers and sisters
  - a. We're not the first ones- isn't it odd how there can be comfort in that?
    - i. But there is comfort in know others have lived through the situation – support groups
  - b. I must say I caution my students in preaching courses when making one-to-one analogies between characters in the bible and ourselves. “We are just like the disciples . . .” No we're not.
    - i. I tend to think that making things simplistically analogous dismisses the reality right in front of us and God doesn't work that way.
  - c. So by saying there are similarities, does not mean I think you are just like the Thessalonians. That's why I say it is simply a starting point. Thessalonians were the Thessalonians. You are you. This living word is for you. Don't imagine yourselves in Thessalonica.
2. **God works** in and through the **particularities** of situations
  - a. by having such a letter as part of the canon suggests to us that particularities of our situation matters to God
3. **Communion of saints**- just as, for God, Atlanta is probably not that far away from Thessalonica, 2010 is not far away from the 50s- no, not the 1950s, the 50s.

There is a life-giving word for us in this letter that I would like us to listen for. This is my first hope for these two allotted times we have together.

1. That is, I want you to hear this word for you—not a word that goes through you to someone else, an okay byproduct, but for you. I would like you to hear this:
  - a. We always give thanks to God for all of you and mention you in our prayers, constantly remembering before our God and Father your **work of faith** and **labor of love** and **steadfastness of hope** in our Lord Jesus Christ. For we know, brothers and sisters beloved by God, that God has chosen you...” (1 **Thess. 1:2-4**)
2. Second objective we will work on more explicitly. That you are able to wrap your heads

around a way of reading the Pauline letters so that you can respond to the question, “What is Paul doing?”

- a. Today will be more general
- b. Tomorrow we will get into some more specifics

*How could it be that this is a living word for you?*

### What is Paul doing?

Try opening: what I just read (1 Thess. 1:2-4) “We always give thanks to God for all of you and mention you in our prayers, constantly remembering before our God and Father your *work of faith* and *labor of love* and *steadfastness of hope* in our Lord Jesus Christ. For we know, brothers and sisters beloved by God, that God has chosen you...”

**ASK** What is Paul doing? (giving thanks and affirming)

Expand it - **Someone read:** 1 Thess 1:1-10

**WRITE** - With the whole first chapter in mind -- take a moment to write what you think Paul is doing.

**ASK** what they think

### Why this question?

1. Above all, Paul was a practitioner who did things.
  - a. My conversation partners in this endeavor are:
    - i. Nancy Gross, *If You Cannot Preach Like Paul*
    - ii. James Thompson, *Preaching Like Paul: Homiletical Wisdom for Today*
      1. Thompson by the way argues that Paul's preaching is evangelistic and pastoral – you may be interested in that book
  - b. Both want to reclaim the Pauline letters for preaching
    - i. But not in a traditional sense. For the traditional sense claims Paul was a systematic theologian.
      1. Imagine *your ministries*. Some of you have been at it for 30 years. Have your basic commitments changed. Or would someone be able to read every sermon, every article, every email and see consistency. (changes according to the situation)

Gross, 37 – “Viewing Paul as a systematic theologian leads us inexorably towards saying what Paul said. And while it is true that part of what Paul did was *to say things*,

to focus on saying what Paul said leads to preaching by explanation. Understanding better *the function of what Paul was doing* invites us to do the things Paul did. This is not to ignore the content of Paul's writings for the sake of his method, but to suggest that we must not ignore how he got to what he said, or to what end he said it."

It must be clarified, Paul was not exactly a practical theologian either. However, practical theology does recognize the dialogical, conversation character of scripture. These characteristics: dialogical and conversational are evident in the Pauline letters: "Paul was a moderator in the conversation between the Christ event as pointed to in the Hebrew Scriptures and testified to by apostolic witnesses, and the situations in which the hearers of his letters found themselves" (Gross, 61).

- ii. Paul was not holed up in some ivory tower. He was among the people, many different kinds of people; and that made all the difference.
- 2. Even Paul said, *Imitate me*, do what I am doing. In order to get at this we have to ask, what is Paul doing? Do what Paul did, as opposed to say what Paul said.
  - a. Of course, as Gross reminded us, the words are not meaningless, for they are what we have to know what Paul is doing.
- 3. In some ways, helps us understand **this as a word for us, now**. Instead of just a word for them, then.
  - a. (Talk about the preaching course)
    - i. Barred from saying- "As Paul said," or "Just like the Thess."
    - ii. "No one comes to church to find out what happened to the Jebusites," Harry Emerson Fosdick, pastor of New York 's Riverside Church.
  - b. **Same for your work I suspect**, scenario – concerned patient in front of you – I just don't know where God is right now –
    - i. Your response, "you know, the Macedonians felt that way too." "Who?" "You know! Mhe Macedonians. Paul referred to them . . . And what they did was." It's rude for the patient to say, although she might want – I don't give two hoots about the Macedonians.
      - 1. Red flags all over the verbatim
- 4. Bigger picture/context
  - a. But this is a kind of meta level.
    - i. You remember your biblical exegesis assignments in seminary (and you remember them fondly, I am sure), when you were to put the pericope in its larger context. Figure out what Jesus what Jesus was doing, what the evangelist, Matthew, for example, was doing.

## Questions? Comments?

**Excursus:** While we know that we cannot get back to the author's intent, we can analyze trajectory of the gospels, for example, to see where the writer might have been headed. We've got words with which to do literary analysis. You know as well as I do that our words, taken out of context, can be disastrous.

Matthew had a reason for saying what he said when he said it. Another level: Jesus had a reason for saying what he said when he said it. Show you the danger of not asking these meta-level questions: Matthew 25

*Practical theology does recognize the dialogical, conversation character of scripture.*

End of Pentecost Yr. A we have one parable one week, the following parable the next week, and then Christ the King. Mt. 25 is covered in these three weeks.

### Matthew 25:1-13 (Someone read)

A typical interpretation of this parable is an allegorical one in which Christ is the bridegroom, we are the bridesmaids, oil is good works or love, the closed door is eschatological judgment, and the marriage is the time of God's salvation. Jesus tells this parable, Matthew recounts it and the preacher interprets it so that we can insure that we do not experience the same disastrous results of the foolish bridesmaids. The irresponsibility and lack of preparation on their part leads to a loss of opportunity to enter God's kingdom. Instead, we are to strive to be like the "wise" bridesmaids, prepared for the unknown time when the bridegroom, Christ, returns. There you have it, another "earn-your-salvation" sermon. Unfortunately, this kind of allegorizing which is used to define how we should live now and who will be in the kingdom has reigned for centuries. The problem is not just that it is misguided, but that it misses out on a possible transformation. **AND, IT DOESN'T MAKE SENSE IN ITS LARGER CONTEXT.**

Square this with John 3:17, "Indeed God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him." Or, better to stay within Matthew, square this with, "He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said" (28:7). **YOU CAN'T.** The interpretation above of this parable simply does not correspond what we know to be true about why God sent Jesus and that, in Jesus, God overcame sin, death, and the power of evil. <sup>2</sup>

So, we have a problem. Is Jesus having an off day? Is Matthew's agenda misaligned? Are we reading this story through lenses muddied by the text's *Wirkungsgeschichte* (the study its reception history)? Put in another way, as hearers, either we have to "shake it off" and come back to church another week hoping the message will be more

just, or be burdened with a “I-better-get-my-act-together-before-Jesus-comes-back.” In the first instance, God’s word is not taken seriously. In the second, God has no role, no agency; humans have all the control. Neither is faithful.

This brings us to the big issue, the bridegroom. While Scripture does depict Jesus or God as the bridegroom, that is not necessarily the intent here.<sup>4</sup> Hearers may not have associated bridegroom with Jesus. Even more, since the bride is not mentioned, it is not likely that the narrator had in mind the allegory of the bridegroom and the church.<sup>5</sup> Luise Schottroff says boldly, “The traditional allegorical interpretation of this parable makes the representative of social injustice, the bridegroom, a divine figure and thus corrupts the gospel.”<sup>6</sup>

HOWEVER, then the bridegroom is not Christ, the foolish bridesmaids do not miss out by being on this side of the closed door. The bridegroom is with those who do not share, those who have access to the goods and materials that are required. Might it not be the case, then, that Christ is on the side of those who are shut out? Of course, Jesus stands with the excluded. We know that! Even more, since Jesus has been attempting to encourage his disciples not to be led astray by false messiahs (Mt. 24), could not the bridegroom be one of those? That is, one who tries to convince us to work harder and harder (FALSE PROPHET), claim what we have earned for ourselves without the need to care for the other (FALSE PROPHET), revel in our own accomplishments (FALSE PROPHET). If the bridegroom is a false prophet, then when he says to the “foolish” bridesmaids, “I do not know you,” what’s keeping the bridesmaids from responding, “We do not know you.”<sup>7</sup>

This is not an innocent text, argues Schottroff, and no allegorical interpretation can make it so. It is a story that speaks of social oppression, indeed of violence. It may be that in social reality people laughed at ugly or naïve girls [which, she argues, is how this text would have been heard], but in fact that laughter was something like a social death sentence. That tradition has made the clever girls a metaphor for right behavior before God, at the expense of the naïve girls, and found this to be Good News.<sup>8</sup>

### The proposal

Schottroff proposes that all depends on the interpretation of the word, “Then,” which begins this parable. In order to understand this, it is important to look at the broader textual context. The whole fifth discourse (24:1 – 25:46) is precipitated by the disciples’ question, “Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?” (24:3). Again, in the beginning of the discourse Jesus encourages his disciples not to be led astray **by false prophets** (24:5). All the present suffering, Jesus says, will not be the end, but the beginning of the birthpangs (24:8). Those who endure all of this to the end will be saved (24:13). The sign of

the end will not be destruction or closed doors, but a pronouncement of good news (24:14). “Then if anyone says to you [upon seeing the ‘desolating sacrilege standing in the holy place’ – 24:15], ‘Look! Here is the Messiah!’ or ‘There he is!’ –do not believe it” (24:23). In other words, suffering will not be the sign of the end. Only after the suffering will Jesus come (24:29-30).

*Might it not be the case, then, that Christ is on the side of those who are shut out? Of course, Jesus stands with the excluded.*

The “then” (which occurs 17 times in the whole discourse) could refer either to the beginning of the birthpangs (the destruction) or to the post destruction when the Messiah has come (Schottroff, 35). The parable at hand, argues Schottroff, (36) refers to the beginning of the birthpangs. Therefore, the parable tells of the horrors of the birthpangs, the present. The MISinterpretation above has assumed the “then” refers to the coming of Jesus. But that just does not correlate with the text’s context.

Schottroff’s proposal is a rhetorical possibility give that “Then the kingdom of heaven will be like this” does not mean that what follows will be a description of what the kingdom of heaven is like. Instead the hearers are invited to compare the story to the kingdom of heaven.<sup>9</sup> When compared with the kingdom of heaven, this story is opposite. The closed door describes the destruction, the beginning of birthpangs, but keep awake, foolish bridesmaids, keep hope, despite being shut out now, there is another one coming.

The last line is the homiletical key. Enduring, keeping awake, is **trusting** that the savior will come after the suffering, **trusting** that there will be something better, trusting that that one is truly Lord and not a false prophet. Then God alone, who is more powerful than all horrors, will be king.

### Footnotes

1. Beverly R. Gaventa, *Interpretation: First and Second Thessalonians* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1998), 68.
2. Two questions the preacher might ponder include: Is it appropriate to uphold an interpretation of a text even though it does not square with what I understand to be true about God? When might such interpretation challenge what I understand to be true about God?
3. Luise Schottroff, *Parables of Jesus* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006), 33. Quoting from Vicky Balabanski, “Opening the Closed Door: A Feminist Reading of the Wise and Foolish Virgins (Mt. 25:1-13)” in *The Lost Coin: Parables of Women, Work and*

*Wisdom*, ed. Mary Ann Beavis (London and New York: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002), 71-97.

4. "J. Jeremias, among others, argued that the metaphor of the Messiah as a bridegroom is foreign to the OT and the literature of late Judaism." From Klyne R. Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent: A Comprehensive Guide to the Parables of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 513. See Mt 9:15; Hos 2:16; Isa 54:5-6; 62:4-5; Jer 31:35 and Ezek 16:6-43 for references to God as the bridegroom compared to Israel. (From Snodgrass, 757).
5. Snodgrass (757) references Eta Linnemann's assessment in *Parables of Jesus: Introduction and Exposition*. Trans. John Sturdy. London: SPCK, 1966.
6. Schottroff, 33.
7. Balabanski, "Opening the Closed Door," 78.
8. Schottroff, 33.
9. A synecrisis is a "comparison of opposites by juxtaposition."
10. Schottroff, 35.
11. *Ibid.*, 36.
12. *Ibid.*, 37.
13. *Ibid.*, 33.
14. *Ibid.*, 35.

### Matthew 25:14-30 (RCL) Matthew 25:14-30 or 25:14-15, 19-21 (LFM)

This parable is yet another story that contrasts a picture of reality with the kingdom of God. This is the third parable in a row that Jesus tells as part of the response to the disciples' question, "Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?" (24:3). Jesus desires that his disciples not be lead astray by false prophets (24:5). He encourages his hearers with the assurance that those who endure all of this to the end "will be saved" (24:13). These parables describe the present days of "destruction" before Jesus depicts what the world will be like when he comes again (Mt. 25:31-46).

Because these comments may vary sharply from most common interpretations, a summary of the latter will be helpful. First, this parable has been the basis of stewardship sermons in which the hearers are encouraged to use their God-given talents (that is, skills and abilities). Those who do will yield greater abilities. A second common interpretation is an allegorical one in which the master is Jesus, the delay is the time between Jesus' death/resurrection and the parousia, and the *doulous* (slaves/servants), "faithful" and "unfaithful," represent Jesus' followers. This interpretation calls us to faithfulness by presenting the actions of the third *doule* as a warning. The sermon exhorts hearers to act a certain way as they wait for Jesus' coming again.

Both interpretations above are focused on us and not God. All we find out about God is that God entrusts us with responsibilities, rewards those who fulfill them and

punishes those who do not. Since Scripture is primarily about God, especially so in this section of Matthew in which the people wonder who Jesus is, the primary focus is God's identity in Jesus Christ. Of course, God has chosen to involve us, so, yes, we do find out the implications of God's identity for our own lives. Even so, the primary focus is God. With anthropocentric interpretations, there tends to be an obsession on what *we* will get

*Since Scripture is primarily about God,  
especially so in this section of Matthew in  
which the people wonder who Jesus is,  
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in Jesus Christ.*

out of this; i.e., salvation. This, even though the parable itself suggests the results will give the *doulous* greater responsibilities (vv. 21, 23) and the joy will belong to the master into which *doulous* can enter.

Beyond this primary problem of anthropocentrism, there are three other overarching concerns with these interpretations: misinterpretation of basic definitions, lack of attention to textual context, and inconsistency with overall Scripture.

#### Basic Definitions

While our word, "**talent**," likely came from this text, this parable is not about our poetic prowess, endurance on the track or vocal virtuosity. Even if "talent" stood for our unique skill set, the parable does not suggest *how* we are to use this. The "hide-it-under-the-bushel-NO!-sermon" simply is not a faithful homiletical trajectory. A talent is an amount of money, equivalent to over 15 years' wages [a daily wage = one denarius and 6000 denarii = one talent]. Yes, it's a lot. The *doulous* in Mt. 25 are entrusted with the master's estate.

Another term that needs clarification is the Greek word, *kyrios*. This same word is used in Scripture to identify both a human master (lord) and God as master (Lord). Most interpretations assume the parable desires for us to see in this human lord our eternal Lord. I will propose otherwise.

#### Textual Context

The interpretations above do not consider a possible function of the story and its place in Jesus' fifth discourse. The "it" in "For it is as if a man . . ." (vs. 14) does not represent the kingdom of God. Instead, this parable desires that we compare this story **with** the kingdom of God. What we will soon discover is that it is actually a contrast. The opening line is to be read as a "**challenge to critical comparison, not as an invitation to equa-**

tion (e.g., not: God is like a king, who . . .).

This point alone opens the possibility that the master in the story does not represent a divine figure. Another justification of this view is the consideration of the parable within the whole fifth discourse. As mentioned above, Jesus is still responding to the disciples' question about what things will look like when he returns. One of the ways he responds is by warning his hearers against false prophets. It is conceivable (and I propose encouraged) to understand the master in this story to represent a false prophet. The difficulty in viewing the text in this new way points to the enticing and longstanding power of the allegorical interpretation.

The unknowns in the parable (e.g., no guidelines for what to do with the talents) push us beyond itself. The parable alone is not intended to answer our questions. The disciples had to continue listening to Jesus and we have to read on; unless, of course, the function of the parable is to remind us that we are on our own in this world. Since I doubt this is the case, we are propelled ahead (to Matt 25:31-46) in order to see that the behaviors in this parable eventually will be confronted with divine judgment.

#### Scripture Overall

**“For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance;** but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away” (vs. 29). This verse alone would have alerted Jesus' hearers and should alert us to the fact that this is not God's way. Jesus' entire ministry has flipped everything upside down; “blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (5:3); “for it is not the will of your Father in heaven that one of these little ones should be lost” (18:14); “the last will be first and the first will be last” (19:30, 20:16); “All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves, will be exalted” (23:12). The “law of increase” (a form of positive thinking endorsing “thoughts and attitudes based on abundance and success attract and produce more abundance and success”<sup>10</sup>) is not at work in Jesus' ministry. The interpretations above buy into this.

When this text is allowed to tell us about God we discover the master is nothing like God. Help us distinguish between the system in the parable and the way of God in Jesus. The sermon will function like a tail wind causing us to lean forward into next week's depiction of God's kingdom.

#### Footnotes

7. Klyne R. Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent: A Comprehensive Guide to the Parables of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 535.
8. Luise Schottroff, *Parables of Jesus* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006), 225.
9. Schottroff, 223.
10. Snodgrass, 542.

11. Schottroff, 185. While Schottroff is speaking about the Lukan version of the parable, she suggests this applies to Matthew as well.
12. Luz, 255 (footnote 74).

*The unknowns in the parable (e.g., no guidelines for what to do with the talents) push us beyond itself. The parable alone is not intended to answer our questions.*

13. Though he does not agree with this interpretation, Snodgrass rightfully warns against interpreters who try to “bring Jesus' teachings into line with ideas of justification by grace and to avoid moralism” (536). That is not the intent here.
14. See Matt 8:12; 13:42, 50; 22:13; 24:51; 25:30; Luke 13:28; Ps. 111:10; Job 16:9; Ps 34:16; 36:12; Lam 2:16
15. Snodgrass, 536.
16. My view of “warn” is certainly different than that of Snodgrass (see previous footnote).
17. Schottroff, 224.

#### Matthew 25:31-46 –Christ the King

We made it! For a couple of Sundays Jesus' parables have invited us to consider alternatives to the kingdom of God. Finally, on this last day of the church year, we are presented with a depiction of God's reign. Indeed, Jesus is a different kind of king! It is this claim we celebrate this day. Even as we celebrate, however, the claim brings us to our knees: “Forgive us for what we have done and for what we have failed to do.”

#### Identity of Jesus

These past few weeks we have been moving toward clarity regarding Jesus' true identity. The people in Jesus' day wanted to know and we want to know. Today we encounter (again, for some of us) a surprising twist. “The juxtaposition of 25:31-46 with its portrayal of the Son of Man in glory identifying with the oppressed and with 26:2, which announces the Son of Man soon to be crucified, is striking. The king who identifies with the poor and oppressed does so out of his own experience.”<sup>12</sup>

We discover the following about Jesus' identity:

1. Jesus is the Son of Man who has authority to summon all the nations
2. Jesus has authority to pass judgment
3. Jesus is accompanied by angels
4. Jesus, as judge, is the one who performs the desires of the father
5. Jesus will become (is!) his challengers' “least of these”

The judge who directs attention to the poor and outcast is numbered among the poor and outcast. The judge is not an abstract or aloof—or terrifying—deity. Rather the judge is Christ himself, one whose own life was actively identified with the poor and outcast, which is the surest possible sign we could have that love for God (represented by such a one) and love for the poor (represented by such a one) are inseparable.<sup>13</sup>

On this day, help your hearers see others with the eyes of their hearts (Ephesians 1). When they do, they see Christ, the King. Jesus does not just hold us accountable, he offers his solidarity with the oppressed and his own experience of oppression as a lens through which to view the least of these. Emphasize that Jesus, as Christ and King, gives us these new lenses so that we might see and experience the “least of these” anew. And through the “least of these,” we see and experience God anew. This calls for a celebration.

#### Footnotes

7. Evangelical Lutheran Worship (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, ), HYMN 431.
8. Klyne R. Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent: A Comprehensive Guide to the Parables of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmanns, 2008), 562.
9. For example, see Snodgrass, 544-548.
10. Luise Schottroff, *Parables of Jesus* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006), 224.
11. Robert McAfee Brown, *Unexpected News, Reading the Bible Through Third World Eyes* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984), 134.
12. Snodgrass, 660.
13. McAfee Brown, 133-4.
14. ELW, HYMN 431.

#### After:

\*Interestingly, we get 1 Thess. in the lectionary at that time as well

Schlepping that stuff about Mt. 25 back to I Thessalonians . . .

\*We want to know, What is Paul doing that he says (1 Thess. 4:4-5) “that each one of you knows how to control your own body in holiness and honor, not with lustful passion, like the Gentiles who do not know God”

\*we want to know how this relates to the very next verse, “that no one wrong or exploit a brother or sister in this matter . . . “ It’s about exploitation. The two, control your own body and do not exploit, cannot be disconnected from one another or from the rest of the letter.

\*we want to know why Paul would say that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night” (5:2). With that verse alone, one might think Paul is trying to instill fear.

\*But this must be understood in light of the following verses: “But you beloved are not in darkness, for you are all children of light and children of the day; we are not

of the night or of darkness.” This looks more like Paul is assuring the hearers not to fear.

[if time, go on to I Thess. 2:1-13]

**What I would like you to do for tomorrow:** These are the kinds of things I want you to look for in preparation for tomorrow. (Read all today or tomorrow in preparation for tomorrow night). It will take you 15-20 minutes. [Less time than reading the sports page -at least in Columbia where ½ the paper is about the USC Gamecocks- that’s another story.] Read it aloud alone. Or, better yet, gather 2 or three others and read it to one another.

*The judge is Christ himself, one whose own life was actively identified with the poor and outcast, which is the surest possible sign we could have that love for God (represented by such a one) and love for the poor (represented by such a one) are inseparable.*

#### Questions? Comments?

1. pay attention the **tone**
2. Notice the particular **ecclesiology** at work
3. Overall (Meta level questions: What is Paul doing?)
  - a. Ask what Paul is doing in order to get at what is foundational for Paul? And whether that too might be foundational for us as practitioners as well.

Conclude with benediction 3:11-13: “Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus direct our way to you. And may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, just as we abound in love for you. And may he so strengthen your hearts in holiness that you may be blameless before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints.”

#### Bible Study 2:

Yesterday morning’s Bible study prompted you to engage I Thess. from a bird’s eye view, by asking What is Paul doing? Actually, it’s not really a bird’s eye view, it’s a human view. For if you receive a letter, if you are like me, you will set aside a time when you can savor the whole thing. But you see we’ve been trained to read bits and pieces, backwards even.

Our excursus into Mt. 25 gave us an example of the potential missed opportunity, danger even, of not having a broader view prior to heading into the certain texts.

So today we will have time to explore what Paul is doing (overall) in this letter. And we will look a little closer

at some sections. (We have just an hour so that latter point, looking closer at certain pericopes you'll be able to do on your own. And I hope you will.)

I asked you to read the whole letter. (15 min.) I want to hear from you for a bit. Offer to the group what you think Paul is doing. (write on board- I may have to help pull you back.)

[Tone.]

[maybe not] (10 min.) 1 Thess. 2:1-13 - "I wonder I notice" (If already did, do 1 Thess. 5:1-11)- maybe later

Certain ecclesiology at work here. It is an understanding of church as **a community that:**

1. has Christ at its center
2. is separated geographically – longing to be face-to-face, but an acknowledgment that despite the separation, they are connected in love for one another and commitment to the gospel
3. celebrates that connection
4. remains steadfast in its foundational beliefs even in the midst of opposition
5. acts a certain way toward one another
  - a. communal (not individual oriented)

As these things were foundational for Paul and the Thessalonians, they are foundational for us. This is indeed a word for you.

**What is Paul doing?** Many things, as you have pointed out, but I want to focus on four. (one at a time)

1. Reminding
2. Affirming
3. Building up/encouraging
4. Thanking

#### Reminding:

1. GENERAL: Take a few minutes to look up these verses, That you already know: "just as you know" (write on board) 1:5; **2: 1, 5, 11**; 3:3, 4; 4:1-2; 5:1-2) – In general, Paul reminds them what they already know.
  - a. Regarding their (Paul and the community) relationship
    - i. What is Paul doing? –
      1. pointing to their past experience
      2. people listen when the speaker knows they are knowledgeable
2. What do they know?
  - a. Paul reminding them that Christ is at the center
    - i. this is **the** basis for future hope

Here is a firm foundation, not only for the Thessalonians, but for you. You already know that Christ is at the center of what you do.

This is not just interesting. It is transformative. It is defining. Dr. Niedner has so poetically, yes, laid out for us how the crucifixion and resurrection turns everything upside. It is defining.

In this gathering you are reminded of those bass notes (as Bishop Hanson described), those foundational beliefs even in the midst of opposition; whether that opposition manifests itself as isolation or secular pressures to say something beyond your own beliefs.

\*story of good shepherd funeral- not a member, but that didn't matter, I was always open. We met. Made some plans. And, at the end, by the way, we want to ask that you not say anything about Christ- we don't believe it- so no Christian symbols. I invited them to sit back down.

*In this gathering you are reminded of those bass notes (as Bishop Hanson described), those foundational beliefs even in the midst of opposition.*

My colleagues mysteriously skipped town.

You can use our chapel. I was present to set things up.

Hospitality.

I didn't know how to bury the dead without mentioning Christ. But I wanted to welcome these people.

They found someone.

I went to the funeral and cried. Empty.

A chaplain. I was grateful he did what he did. But was I?

What would I to say to a group of mourners when their loved one has died and whose dead is in the casket in front of us, if not, "We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life"? Does this mean I am inflexible?

- b. Paul is reminding them of a way to live

Again, you already know all of this. But, be reminded.

1. The distinctiveness of the Christian belief changes the way you (y'all) act with and toward one another
  - a. Talk more in a moment.

Remind one another. Even more, find ways to be reminded- foundational beliefs, ways to act.

- b. Find communities that will remind you.

#### Affirming:

1. Not only do you already know what you need to know, but you are already doing what you need to be doing.
2. Paul affirms the community's ongoing love for one another and commitment to the gospel was evident when Timothy visited. Even in Macedonia and Achaia they have heard about them

- (1:7).
3. Read 3:6-10
    - a. Ongoing love, even though they are separated from Paul . . .
      - i. You are separated geographically (isolation, the wilderness) but connected. Your love for one another, unity in your commitment to the gospel, longing to unite keeps you connected.
    - b. Ongoing love, even though they are facing some resistance
      - i. (674) “It is their mutual yearning for one another that strengthens them in their capacity to endure and to remain faithful to one another and to the gospel. It is their love that enables Paul to endure his own suffering (3:7), it is this which he says keeps him alive (3:8).”
        1. The love this community shows one another (even, especially, in Paul’s absence) keeps him alive
    - c. 673- “The passion of mission” as Paul presents it is “that it [the community] endures opposition from the social and religious order within which it seeks to inaugurate new assemblies of hope and love.”
      - i. Problem here- is the we/they language
      - ii. Problem in 2:14-16 – READ –
      - iii. Ask- What is problematic?
        1. that the persecuted then turn around and persecute-
      - iv. Ask- How does reading this in light of the whole letter help you understand it?
        1. some scholars believe this is a later interpolation
        2. maybe nothing more than - you are persecuted by a particular group, just as Jesus was persecuted by a particular group-
        3. maybe just some (Jews) which is true- but does not justify blowing it out of proportion to mean all Jews
        4. some have suggested that “at last” could mean “only until the end” suggesting , “that this wrath is meant eventually to prove salvific for the people of Israel.”
        5. Perhaps Paul is in survival mode-
        6. Ask: What happens when we are in survival mode?
          - a. Turn in upon ourselves
          - b. We make solid dotted lines around us
          - c. Even worse we lash out at those outside
          - d. does that mean we should go

along?

- e. I certainly hope people do not remember me, least of all imitate my words and actions when I am in survival mode

*Paul affirms the community’s ongoing love for one another and commitment to the gospel was evident when Timothy visited.*

- v. Skinner, “Whatever Paul’s reasons for these words, interpreters do well to remember that the wider context does not suggest that this is Paul’s definitive treatise about the state of all Jews before God. He was a Jew himself. Paul’s main point is to describe the opposition that the Thessalonian believers are enduring. He does this by comparing it to fervent opposition that believers have faced elsewhere.”

1. Yes this is an internal letter of sorts. Sometimes you just have to have a family meeting. And as inclusive as you want to be, there is a time to say, “Give us a minute.” This does not mean that we will stay huddled only as a little family. The trajectory of our mission is always outward.
2. Being firm in our foundational beliefs is not the same as condoning intolerance of other beliefs.

- d. This is an example of the importance of reading a pericope in light of the whole letter. Paul is affirming this band of followers of Christ, it is not to condemn those who do not follow Christ or do not follow Christ in the way we think they should.

4. Christus in Mundo- affirming of the work- on what ways does your community intentionally affirm one another in similar ways at various stages of ministry.

#### Building up/encouraging:

1. How- by describing the character of his relationship to the Thessalonians in a variety of ways. This is itself encouraging. - Did you notice metaphors for the relationship between Paul and the community?
  - a. LIST THEM.
  - b. Metaphors (ecclesiology) 672- “The remarkable deployment of metaphors to describe the relation between Paul and this commu-

nity—**nurse** [2:7], **father** [2:11], **infant, orphan** [2:17] and **brothers**—scrambles not only gender categories but positions or roles of authority and power (Beverly Gaventa *I and 2 Thessalonians* 1998b:26-8).

- c. Paul has every reason to be the boss. He taught them what they know, for goodness sake. **Only an extraordinarily passionate love can afford to be so heedless of the categories and roles by which society is governed.**
  - i. It has been noted that it is surprising that in the Post-Pauline church, now, masculine metaphors are dominant when we talk about those who lead (elder, pastor)- why not wet nurse (QBC, 672)?
- d. This conglomeration of metaphors, constantly in flux, serves to build up the community as it leaves room for others to emerge.
- 2. How- Sends Timothy (when cannot be face-to-face, makes an effort that there be some face-to-face contact)
  - i. Send Timothy to strengthen their loyalty to the gospel
- 3. How- by addressing their concerns directly- (4:13- resurrection of the dead)
  - a. They are concerned those who have already died have lost their chance- encourages through providing hope that even those who have already died will meet the Lord.
- 4. **What**- Encourages them to remain steadfast in its foundational beliefs even in the midst of opposition
- 5. **What** [CONDUCT]- Encourage them to maintain a certain way of conducting their lives (start to see how remind, affirm and encourage are connected)
  - a. Defining characteristic is love for one another- This makes them ready to stand in the coming of the Lord Jesus
    - i. I Thess. as a love song to the community (QBC, 675- Gaventa quote)
  - b. The way you treat one another matters- do not seek your own advantage at the expense of others (this plays an important role in Paul)
    - i. This is what Paul is referring to in the beginning of ch. 4 (4:6)
    - ii. Do not defraud one another- do not exploit one another- in any way- including through sexual behaviours.
- c. Builds up community by encouraging them to edify one another
- 6. **Read** - 5:12-22- not addressed to individuals but to persons who share life together

- a. gentleness of Paul's admonitions-5:14 (the nurse-like work which all perform)
  - i. admonish idlers
  - ii. encourage the fainthearted
  - iii. help the weak
  - iv. be patient with all of them

*Only an extraordinarily passionate love can afford to be so heedless of the categories and roles by which society is governed.*

- b. You do this for others.
  - 1. how does your community of pastoral care providers do these things
  - 2. Beyond this conference, when, where, from whom, how do you hear encouragement in your faith?
  - 3. Where is there room for more?
- 7. Key is that it is not just a pep talk – but there is something that enables this – (I get frustrated with sermons that are idealistic- it's easy- if it were that easy we would have done it)
  - a. God is at work
    - i. Here is firm foundation – believe in the faithfulness of God to accomplish these things
  - b. Spirit works through the communities action as those within the community act a certain way toward one another
    - i. Again, it's communal (not individual oriented)

### Thanking

- 1. Paul thanks the community
- 2. Tells them to thank one another
- 3. Paul thanks God for them
- 4. I hope you are thanked regularly.
- 5. I thank you for your faith, your labor of love, your steadfastness of hope.
- 6. I thank God for you.

By exploring the question, “What is Paul doing?” we see that Paul is, among other things, reminding, affirming, encouraging, thanking.

### I have one final section, BUT any questions or comments?

**There is another reason why I think I Thess. is a word for you.** It is different than other letters. Yes, some opposition. BUT it does not take over. Pastoral care not in crisis mode (Paul is not responding to immediate crisis though there is some push back). Can sense the JOY in this celebratory love letter.

I wonder about your ministries; ministries which may be defined as crisis mode ministries, ministries in the

midst of so much suffering. What does ministry look like when it lets up a bit; when there is a little bit of give? YEAH RIGHT, you are thinking.

What are the moments of joy and celebration in chaplaincy, pastoral counseling and clinical pastoral education? You may not see those moments as much as a parish pastor might because the person is out of the hospital by then, lacks continuity. Perhaps that ministry is with one another. Paul is expressing deep joy that comes from love for one another, when your colleagues' foundations are firm you too are kept alive. This is a very distinct ecclesiology and vocation. Ministry is also about reminding, affirming, encouraging and thanking. Joy and celebration within the community allows us to be about our mission out there.

Without dismissing suffering, there has to be joy. Fred reminded us of the miners' need for religion and humor.

#### TELL MY STORY -

When I was about 9 years old (which isn't that accurate because I seem to remember everything happening when I was 9) it occurred to me that a pre-requisite for being Christian was being miserable. Only those who hated life, despaired endlessly are true Christians. Some who hold a certain interpretation of a theology of the cross might say that the Lutheran church I attended was doing its job.

But it kind of backfired, you know. Here I was an energetic, grateful, well-loved young gal who one day decided she would show her true Christian spirit by **moping, donning a dour face, reveling** in telling others about my shortcomings and failures. I had made it: thank God I am finally miserable. Yes!

I was so serious that I probably put at the top of my Christmas list ... misery. 9 yrs. old...or so. You know what tripped me up...the cross; somehow I had heard that I was required to shape my life to meet the misery/torture it represents. I was using every single morsel of wisdom I could muster to figure out how to interpret the event of the crucifixion and shape my life accordingly. In some strange, subtle way this is a theology of glory. I was heartbroken when I realized that such a life of anguish was not for me and was resigned to thinking that I couldn't be a "true" Christian.

Though it is true and tremendous that God is greater than my moments of suffering, anything is better than that. It has been life-giving for me to realize that God is greater than my moments of bliss, when everything is going right. In these moments, God intervenes also through communities that remind, affirm, encourage, and thank.

**In Christ dying leads to rising. And it is this that we celebrate.**

1. The work that you do is so very crucial to our community of believers. It is critical for the gospel. It is life-giving for the world.
2. I encourage you to remain steadfast – to stand

firm in your faith. When you do, we are all more alive.

3. So I thank you for the work that you do. I thank God for you.

**I'LL END WITH these words, you'll recognize them (5:23-24, 28)** May the God of peace [himself] sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do this. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.

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*Professor Hannan has studied five languages (Spanish, German, French, Hebrew, and Koine Greek) and enjoys teaching practical theology and speech, in addition to homiletics.*

*When not in the classroom she is always planning her next trip, usually along a "road less traveled" either abroad or within the United States. She enjoys any outdoor activities as well singing anywhere from the campfire to the church choir.*

# The State of SPM in the LCMS

## An interview with John Fale

Recently, after the Rev. Matthew Harrison was elected as the new President of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod (LCMS) and the Synod voted to restructure its administration, Joel Hempel, retired CPE Supervisor with Lutheran Senior Services of St. Louis and member of the Inter-Lutheran Coordinating Committee (ILCC), sat down with John Fale, the former Associate Executive Director of LCMS World Relief and Human Care, to discuss the current status of Specialized Pastoral Ministry (SPM) in the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod.

**Joel:** *Needless to say, there have been many changes in your position at the International Center since you began this ministry eight years ago. What exactly is your title, and how have your responsibilities changed?*

**John:** I have been asked to serve as Interim Executive Director of LCMS World Relief and Human Care until the restructuring process is complete, which should be by July 1.

**Joel:** *So your ministry is primarily administrative at this time.*

**John:** I also serve on the President's Restructure Work Group. This is the group of people who are charged with making recommendations to the President of Synod regarding the structural changes mandated by the 2010 Convention Resolution 8-08.

**Joel:** *Talking about the restructuring of synod, where does that stand as of today?*

**John:** We are meeting, working diligently, and hope to have something concrete to the President by February. There have already been some changes in organization and staffing as reported on Synod's website and in The Reporter.

**Joel:** *On a somewhat different but related note, as we approached the LCMS Convention last year, I know you were anticipating the passage of a resolution that would have made it possible for Human Care Ministries to call a rostered minister to a Specialized Pastoral Ministry position which was not within a Recognized Service Organization (RSO). As it turned out, that resolution did not get out of committee. I remember you saying at the Zion Conference, that this was a major disappointment for you and Judy Ladage, Specialized Pastoral Ministry Coordinator.*

**John:** It was more than a disappointment; A member of the Commission on Constitutional Matters spoke to the Floor Committee members, offering an opinion that the calling of institutional chaplains came under the umbrella of restructuring, Resolution 8-08. Initially I was

in disbelief! Since the convention, I have learned that such calls can be extended by authority of the President. However, nothing is codified as yet. I am waiting for the restructuring business to get implemented before raising this important matter to Matt.

**Joel:** *Do you care to be more specific?*

**John:** I anticipate that it will be around mid-to-late summer of this year before restructuring will be implemented. Following that time, I will discuss the matter with President Harrison and make a recommendation for calling someone in the field. There have been a number of folks in Specialized Pastoral Ministry who have expressed interest in receiving a call. I'd like to go through the process with one person first to ensure that it is a smooth process before extending calls to many others.

**Joel:** *There are two other areas of Specialized Pastoral Ministry I want to address with you, about which I believe our readers have an interest. First, even though your ministry responsibilities have changed significantly, you are still the person who was called and charged with overseeing and assisting God in developing Specialized Pastoral Ministry in our church body. So, in your opinion, what is the state of SPM in the Missouri Synod at this time?*

**John:** Well, I think there is good news and there are challenging opportunities that face us. The good news is that the Specialized Pastoral Ministry endorsement process is highly valued by our District Presidents, thanks to the foundation that was laid by my predecessors. The majority of District Presidents (DP) I talk with express appreciation for our Specialized Pastoral Ministers and for the endorsement process that helps DPs to be confident when endorsing ministers for chaplaincy, pastoral counseling, or clinical education. Unquestionably, a growing number of District Presidents are more aware of what we do and are grateful for it! In addition, I can assure you that President Harrison – especially with his passion for mercy – has been and continues to be a great supporter of Specialized Pastoral Ministers and the service we provide amidst some very unique and challenging settings!

The challenge and opportunity is that there are still too many DPs who are *not* aware of the significance of the endorsement process. Coupled with that, human care agencies and Recognized Service Organizations don't always require the credentialing that we look for when a colleague comes before an endorsement committee. Therefore, a united message is not being communicated to SPMs, DPs, various mercy ministries around the country, and to our church body. This lack of unity

in credentialing and calling does not help our common cause in Specialized Pastoral Ministry! I accept responsibility for this challenge. My schedule has not allowed me to have the kind of regular contact with District Presidents that I had when I served only as the Director of Specialized Pastoral Ministry.

So bottom line, we still have a lot of work to do in communicating – to District Presidents, CEOs, and to those who seek to serve in SPM – the kind of accountability, emphasis in Lutheran identity, confidence in credentialing, continuing education, and peer support that is part and parcel of endorsement and professional certification.

**Joel:** *Because I include you in emails regarding Circuit Pastors Conferences, you know that I am privileged to serve as Circuit Counselor for a local circuit here in St. Louis. In this role, I make it a point to promote and include Specialized Pastoral Ministers in mailings and meetings. As a result, our District President, the Rev. Dr. Ray Mirly, has expressed appreciation for increasing his sensitivity and awareness of the ministries we specialized church workers provide.*

*The reason I bring this up is to ask you: Why do you think Specialized Pastoral Ministers have been the “step-ministers” of the Missouri Synod?*

**John:** To be fair, I don't think that is the case in all arenas where I serve and circulate. As I say, there is an increasing appreciation for our various ministries. Having said that, the truth includes the fact that our church body has historically placed greater attention and resources on missions and outreach than on human care ministry – or what we are now calling “mercy ministry.” It is obvious to you and me and those who are reading this interview that mission and mercy are inseparable. But historically, we have neither consistently nor with sufficient frequency made the connection between what we do in Specialized Pastoral Ministry and the mission of the church. In reality, those who serve in Specialized Pastoral Ministry are very engaged in the church's witness to life in Christ within the very settings where people often need to hear a word of life and light and have attention given to their soul.

In addition, unlike military chaplaincy, institutional chaplaincy and pastoral counseling are currently located structurally within the church's mercy ministry. When I talk with my counterparts in other denominations – like in the Southern Baptist Convention, for example – SPMs are identified with the church's witness. As a result, Specialized Pastoral Ministers in the Southern Baptist Convention are growing in recognition and numbers. Certainly, our chaplains and pastoral counselors and clinical educators are engaged in various acts of mercy in multiple contexts as they serve our Lord. But it is also true that they engage in witness to Christ as they minister to believers and unbelievers alike.

**Joel:** *True enough! I think we also have to admit that our*

*church body does a much more thorough job of communicating the work of missionaries to the LCMS membership than they do the work of SPMs. It is not unusual for LCMS members to receive booklets and various mailings from the International Center telling the stories of missionaries overseas and in the Americas. Only occasionally do I see similar stories about the ministries of pastoral counselors, clinical educators and institutional chaplains. Maybe in your new position you could work on that!*

**John:** Where I will serve in the new structure is yet to be determined. I will always be a strong advocate for institutional chaplaincy, pastoral counseling, and clinical education.

**Joel:** *Knowing that you have had a major shift in day-to-day duties, and because of other staff changes throughout the International Center, two additional questions come to mind. First, if one of our constituents needs something from you or from the Specialized Pastoral Ministry office, whom do they contact?*

**John:** I suggest interested parties contact me at [john.fale@lcms.org](mailto:john.fale@lcms.org), or 800 248-1930, ext. 1384. They can also find important information on our website, [www.lcms.org/spm](http://www.lcms.org/spm).

**Joel:** *The other question is based on concern for you and for all of the leadership, organizing, and administration you have provided to the church in the area of SPM. How will this get done and who will do it? Before you respond, I invite you to consider how a number of us in the field might be of service to the church by picking up some of the periodic, if not day-to-day responsibilities. Quite frankly, John, these questions are asked with a measure of angst in regard to the restructuring of our synod. My fear is that we in Specialized Pastoral Ministry might become even more invisible as your responsibilities grow.*

**John:** I appreciate the concern and the offer, Joel. I heard some of that angst from folks who attended the Zion Conference. There is a palpable fear that the SPM will shrink into the background. I mentioned that I was invited to serve on the President's Restructuring Work Group. As part of a subcommittee task, I have recommended a position designated for Specialized Pastoral Ministry. We can only wait to see how that will flesh out in the restructuring. There are many important programs that are in need of limited dollars.

**Joel:** *Before bringing this interview to an end, I feel obliged to address one of the concerns voiced by some of our colleagues at the Zion Conference this past fall. What is your opinion about how the change in administration and structure might impact the good working relationship Specialized Pastoral Ministers have had with our brothers and sisters in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA)? Can you address this concern?*

**John:** I'm sure you are aware that the convention del-

egates resolved in part through Resolution 3-03 to study the LCMS' "cooperation in externals" with other church bodies. Certainly included in that resolve is study of our relationship with the ELCA, particularly in light of the Resolutions' language that referenced the ELCA's decisions regarding blessing same-sex unions and ordaining gay and lesbian candidates who are sexually active. If I'm not mistaken, we are taking this up again in 2013. It is my understanding that the Commission on Theology and Church Relations (CTCR) has completed its study, has written a report and it is now in the hands of President Harrison. Since there has been no official word from the president's office as of the writing of this article (early February), there is no status change regarding inter-Lutheran relations. So, until it has been decided otherwise, we continue working together on the Inter-Lutheran Coordinating Committee (ILCC) and in other less official capacities.

**Joel:** *I realize that you may not be at liberty to comment on what I'm about to say, but I have a need to speak for what I believe is the majority of our LCMS colleagues in SPM. I would hate to lose what we have had with our ELCA friends! You know this, but the reader of this article may not know this, so I'm going to state it: We – the ILCC – do a lot of very good work **together**. As a committee that had its beginning back in 1988 under Dick Tetzloff and Serge Costigilano, we have written the Ecclesiastical Endorsement Manual (and continue updating it and making it more "consumer friendly") to guide those who believe they are called into a Specialized Pastoral Ministry. And then, when they are ready to proceed toward endorsement, committees appointed by the ILCC review the candidates and make recommendations to their District President or Bishop. In addition, we organize the triennial Zion Conference, publish *Caring Connections*, make grants through the "Give Something Back Scholarship Fund," give recognition to "Christus In Mundo" awardees, and sponsor "Lutheran breakfasts" for our colleagues at various professional conferences. It will be a sad day if we cannot continue this privilege we have shared together.*

**John:** It would be a sad day, indeed! In fact, our relationships go back further than 1988, when the ELCA was formed. Prior to the Inter-Lutheran Coordinating Committee, there was a partnership for specialized pastoral ministry through the Lutheran Council in the United States of America (LCUSA). That's where the first ecclesiastical endorsement guidelines were drafted. We have a number of LCMS folks who have made significant contributions to endorsement and have lifted up the importance of specialized pastoral ministry as an integral part of the church's witness to Christ. Dick and Serge built upon a foundation that was already laid, and then developed a set of standards that are respected by other denominations as well as pastoral care organizations. They appreciate our intentionality of articulating what is means to be Lutheran in our identity and in the care of souls. If I'm not mistaken, the "Give Something

Back Scholarship Fund" was Dick's brainchild.

This relationship is important to me as well. When the ELCA reduced funding to the ILCC for meetings and breakfasts, the LCMS stayed committed to making this work and matched dollar for dollar, even though the majority of those who attend the breakfast are from the ELCA. I have valued the professional friendships that have evolved for me with Bryn Carlson and Judy Simonson. And I have thoroughly enjoyed working with the ILCC.

If there is a decision to discontinue working relationships with the ELCA, it will not be a statement about the value of our work through the ILCC. The contributions cannot be diminished! That being said, I think our church body in convention was expressing that the direction the ELCA has chosen to take is offensive to the Word of God, to us, and it is distressing and significant. Let me tell you Joel, I heard the floor committee discussions; this is really important to our Synod!

**Joel:** *Thank you, John, for your candid and generally unguarded comments throughout this interview. I realize that John Fale, the Pastoral Counselor and Chaplain, can easily respond to these questions with openness and candor. It is an understandable challenge for the Interim Executive Director for LCMS World Relief and Human Care to do the same. I believe that our colleagues in Specialized Pastoral Ministry will appreciate your thoughtful and sensitive wording and expression of feelings on a variety of subjects. May our Lord continue to bless you, your family, and your growing ministry with the LCMS!*

**John:** Thank you!

## New and noteworthy

### 2011 Christus in Mundo Awardees

#### Leroy B. Joesten

Leroy Joesten, Vice President for Mission and Spiritual Care at Advocate Lutheran General Hospital of Park Ridge, Illinois, has a long history of ministering to grieving persons as well as serving as a CPE supervisor. A Board Certified Chaplain with the Association of Professional Chaplains, he is also certified as a Supervisor with the Association of Clinical Pastoral Education.

In the 1990's he was involved and published articles relative to the veridicality of near death experiences. He has also taken a personal interest in the Hospice Movement, consulting and publishing on grief issues.

As a CPE supervisor, he is known for his empathic listening and insightful guidance. His sense of balanced humor leavened more than a few serious situations. His didactics were particularly helpful in dealing with families of the deceased.

Highly respected within the Advocate Health System, he has managed the chaplaincy department of Advocate Lutheran General Hospital of Park Ridge to promote collegiality and growth.

His contributions as part of the Planning Committee for the 2010 Association of Professional Chaplains Conference have been evident and appreciated. His record stands as an example for all Lutherans involved in chaplaincy.

#### George Doebler

George Doebler has defined the role of pastoral care in the Knoxville area for more than 40 years. He is a man of charisma, insight, and compassion. He has been a tireless supporter of the mental health care field. He served as Director of Chaplaincy Services for more than 20 years at Lakeshore Mental Health Institute and as President of the Association of Mental Health Clergy for 22 years. In 1985 he established the Pastoral Care Department at the University of Tennessee Medical Center. Since then the department has trained more than 150 clergy through its residency program. The medical center has honored him by establishing an endowment in his name stating:

“The George and Nancy Doebler Pastoral Care Endowment is an everlasting tribute to George and Nancy and their vision of compassionate spiritual care for all patients and families coming to the University of Tennessee Medical Center for care. As an expansion of this vision, George created the pastoral care residency



(left to right) George Doebler, Bruce Hartung, Lee Joesten, Bruce Peterson

program which trains future chaplains in pastoral care, compassionate communications and spiritual guidance. The Doebler Pastoral Care Endowment will ensure the continuation of this residency program and the advanced education of chaplains.”

George also has provided guidance to countless individuals and families through his pastoral counseling. In times of crisis, he is in much demand as a respected and trusted counselor.

George's distinguished career and the significant impact it has had on so many lives, makes him worthy of consideration for the Christus in Mundo Award.

#### Bruce Hartung

Bruce has long been a major contributor and advocate seeking to strengthen and improve ministry, service and education in pastoral care and counseling both among Lutherans and ecumenically. He served admirably in several capacities in developing the inter-organizational vision of the Congress on Ministry in Specialized Settings (COMISS) and served on the Coordinating Committee that planned and implemented DIALOG 88, the major conference serving to initiate COMISS. He was an active member of the Association of Lutherans in Specialized Pastoral Care when he was especially noted for his work in bringing together the Executives for the medical health plans of both LCMS and ELCA to meetings to discuss advances in wellness, prevention and health promotion, and their place in health insurance coverage. He has been both a distin-

guished academic and practitioner of the pastoral care and counseling arts.

### Bruce Pederson

We wholeheartedly and joyfully submit Chaplain Bruce Pederson for this prestigious award in recognition of his long commitment to keeping alive the spiritual and church relations with Ebenezer's mission to service older adults and others, in making their lives as independent, healthful, meaningful, and secure as possible.

After an already illustrious career, Bruce began his ministry with Ebenezer as corporate chaplain. He also served initially providing direct spiritual care with residents in two different nursing home entities. With support from the corporate leadership of Ebenezer, Bruce build a small cadre of chaplains to be the providers of professional spiritual care. Bruce insisted that Ebenezer call Board Certified Chaplains, or those eligible to be board certified. This was a marked advance from a practice of only hiring retired pastors who previously served congregations.

We each are one of those chaplains hired because of Bruce's guidance. We appreciate how Bruce has the quality of great listening skills and the ability to be supportive to us as chaplains as we may be struggling and working through issues and challenges in our work.

Even after his retirement from full time work, Bruce continues to function as a part time employee continuing to provide the support and connectivity we as chaplains need, far above what he is paid. He continues his work to nurture the connections with congregations affiliated with Fairview and Ebenezer.

In addition, Bruce has kept corporate leadership aware of the importance of spiritual care in serving residents benefiting from Ebenezer's Mission and patients benefiting from Fairview's Health Services. Bruce's vision for ministry with seniors and his joyful affirmation of our ministry together is remarkable and life giving. He affirms the commitment to provide spiritual care to people from all walks of life. Bruce has given his life in ministry as a reflection of Christ in the World (Christus in Mundo).

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## Events

## How to Subscribe

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### Inter-Lutheran

Oct. 24-27, 2012 Zion XV Conference at Lutheridge Lutheran  
Camp and Conference Center in Arden,  
North Carolina

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