

The **LUTHERAN** **CLARION**



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What has Wichita Wrought?

Rev. Dr. Roger Paavola¹ gave the presentation below on January 14, 2019, at the Lutheran Concerns Association 2019 Conference at Fort Wayne, IN.

Holy Scripture says, "And when they had appointed elders for them in every church, with prayer and fasting, they committed them to the Lord in whom they believe." (Acts 14:23) [All Bible References are from *The Lutheran Study Bible*, Concordia Publishing House, St Louis, English Standard Version.] What is to be done when a congregation needs a Pastor, theologically trained and rightly called, to step into the pulpit to proclaim Christ? The necessity of the pastoral office is not an ecclesiastical arrangement, but a divine institution, because God is a God of order. It is by His divine ordering that the particular office of pastor exists in the church, and for the church. God's Baptized children are to be fed and nourished through Word and Sacrament. But, is there a "next best" option when a pastor is not available? God's Word and the Augustana answer the question: Doctrine matters! Faithful preaching of the Word matters! The proper administration of the sacraments matter! The lives within a congregation – regardless of size or geography – matter! Thus, our Confessions concerning the pastoral office matters!

The Called and ordained servant of the Word is the "steward of the mysteries of God," (1 Corinthians 4:1) and is the Order by which God ordained to serve His people. This is nothing new! Yet, if a pulpit is vacant; an altar is unattended – the parish is miles away from the next congregation – then a spiritual emergency exists as the flock is in need of a called

"...no one may preach or administer the sacraments in public worship without being duly Called in the proper Rite of the Church."

"Concordia Triglotta," Concordia Publishing Company, St. Louis, 1921, 48

shepherd. What is to be done? Confusion surrounding who may be Called or serve in the office of the public ministry in the church is obviously nothing new. It began already in the early Church. St Paul's letter to the Galatians begins with an explanation of his Calling by Christ as His ambassador to the Gentiles.

In our Lutheran Confession, Augsburg Article XIV states: "It is taught among us that nobody should publicly teach or preach or administer the sacraments in the church without a regular call."ⁱⁱ Augsburg Article V: "To obtain such faith God instituted the office of the ministry that is, provided the Gospel and the Sacraments." OR... "In order that we may obtain

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Dr. Edwin Suelflow on 70 Years in the Office of the Holy Ministry

During the 2018 South Wisconsin District Convention, Dr. Edwin Suelflow was recognized for 70 years in the Holy Ministry. Below are Dr. Suelflow's remarks. He died six months later on December 31, 2018.

South Wisconsin District President John Wille introduced Dr. Suelflow as follows:

We have a very, very special guest...I'm going to wait till he gets up to the stage. He told me he would come, if he didn't have to speak...I said you don't have to speak, there's plenty of people want to speak. Reverend Doctor Edwin Suelflow served as the District President many years in this district. He was a pastor in various areas...at Walther Memorial [Milwaukee]. Good to have you with us. [Applause, standing ovation].

The plaque [reads]: "Edwin Suelflow, in celebration of seventy years of ministry. Well done, good and faithful servant; by the South Wisconsin District, signed by the District President [John Wille]." Today is also Ed and Irma's 70th wedding anniversary, and Irma's in a care facility. [Applause]

Dr. Edwin Suelflow: Thank you very much! You heard it said, and as you probably noticed also, the old guys like to tell stories. I'm going to tell you a story. I do this to Pastor [Peter] Bender. Occasionally in his Bible Class I interrupt him with a story.

A fellow asked me not too long ago, "You've been a pastor for 70 years. Did you learn anything?" [Laughter]. And I thought to myself, "This fellow needs some catechesis!" So I told him, "I know for sure that the Word of God has the power to change the hearts and lives of people. The Word of God has the power to lead people to repentance. The Word of God has the power to bring comfort and peace to the sorrowing and distraught. The Word of God has the power to offer hope, the assurance of forgiveness, the promise of eternal life." He didn't quite know what to say to this.

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So, then, I want to tell you another story. Years ago—it was 1938 when I enrolled as a student at Concordia College [Milwaukee], a freshman in high school. One of my professors—he taught mathematics—was my professor for six years. Those of you who went to Concordia Prep

School probably remember that we had lots of different names for our math

Dying is no child's play.

prof. His real name was Paul Zanow. In the course of human events, this professor of mine became a parishioner of mine—I became his pastor at Walther Memorial. It was a fine relationship: he liked to play pinochle and would invite my wife and I for dinner, and Ada and Paul would play pinochle with us. As he grew older, Professor Zanow contracted cancer. And I remember in the late afternoon, the night that he died, I sat at his bedside and shared with him a word from God, and offered prayer, and I spoke the words of the benediction. He was too weak, really, to respond to anything, but I did hear him say in almost a whisper, “*Sterben ist kein kinder spiel.*” I don’t know why he reverted to German, but he did: “*Sterben ist kein kinder spiel.*” “Dying is no child’s play.” And I got to thinking, “Does he have in mind what Luther used to talk about—the *Anfechtung*—how Satan would try, up to the moment of death, to dissuade the believer in Christ, cause fear, and doubt, and unbelief?” And afterwards, by the way, what he told me that late afternoon became the opening sentence in my sermon for his funeral: “*Sterben ist kein kinder spiel.*”

And I thought to myself, “This is what the ministry is all about. This is what pastors do: to prepare people for the day of their death—to share with them the Word of God—to bring them the Sacrament of the Lord’s Body and Blood—to lead them in the confession of their sins and absolution—to consecrate the elements in their presence—to assure their forgiveness.” You remember what Luther said in the catechism: “where there is forgiveness of sins, there is also life and salvation.”

While I have the opportunity, I encourage you pastors: spend time with the sick, the shut-ins, the old members of your congregation. Help prepare them for the time that they meet their Maker in death. Do not relegate that sort of ministry to an elder. Do not use the leftover elements from the Eucharist the Sunday before and bring them to somebody’s house. Be there yourself, because “*Sterben ist kein kinder spiel: Dying is no child’s play.*”

I thank the Lord that he gave me the opportunity to share this Gospel with people in the parish for forty years, then, as I always say, “The District kicked me upstairs to the District office.” And, well, to be a bureaucrat in the district is not the same as being a parish pastor. I enjoyed that opportunity and thank my God for it. Thank you for your observance of my anniversaries today. The Lord be with you! [Applause]

“Congregations Matter” Exposed

In November 2018, congregations of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod received a glossy mailer from an organization called “Congregations Matter.” The purpose of the mailer was to promote two candidates for the president of the Synod during the nomination period. Nominations are made by congregations of the Synod and were due February 20, 2019.

“Congregations Matter” has made a number of false accusations against the current administration of the Synod. These false accusations are sinful. Even if the candidates endorsed by “Congregations Matter” had nothing to do with the making of these accusations to begin with, their names are now being linked to these false accusations. It is their duty as brothers in Christ of those being wrongly accused to disavow “Congregations Matter” and call those responsible for it to repentance. If they do not do so, their churchmanship must be called into question.

I have no problem with individuals, groups, or organizations encouraging others to nominate specific persons for office. How else can leaders be nominated or elected? We have a democratic system of government in the Synod and no one should be ashamed of that, or any of its parts. C.F.W. Walther defended the Missouri Synod’s structure and government against Lutherans in both Europe and America who thought that the only legitimate form of church government was episcopal (i.e., rule by bishops of unlimited tenure). Our Synod has been well served by its democratic structure for over 171 years.

I am concerned, however, with individuals, groups, or organizations who sin against officers or board members of the Synod by violating the Eighth Commandment. Lutherans understand the Eighth Commandment according to Luther’s explanations in his *Small Catechism* and *Large Catechism*. Such sins against the Synod officers or board members are also sins against the Synod itself.

Does the November 2018 mailer from “Congregations Matter” commit Eighth Commandment sins against officers and board members of the LCMS? Yes. Is the intent to have them removed from office at the 2019 convention? Obviously, it is. It was mailed to about 6,000 congregations which include about 2 million baptized members.¹ The LCMS President’s intended replacements are advertised in living color on the mailer, and other officers’ replacements can be found at their web-site.²

Where is my proof? One side of the mailer has four questions that *misrepresent* the work and actions of present leadership in the Synod and so bring *undeserved discredit* to them. If that isn’t a sin against the Eighth Commandment, I don’t know what is. I will address each question individually.

The first question in the “Congregations Matter” mailer argues that there is a “loss of congregational autonomy as current Synod leadership gobbles up more control into national headquarters.” That is not true. There has been no change in our congregations’ relationship to the national Synod, its agencies, or officers, as defined by the LCMS Constitution in Article VI “Conditions of Membership” and Article VII “Relation of the Synod to Its Members.”³ That relationship has remained constant, with no changes since 1854 when the Missouri Synod adopted its revised Constitution.⁴

It is true that there was a centralization of authority *within* the national offices at the convention in 2010. In that year, the former convention-elected “program boards” were eliminated in favor of a structure that gave the President of the Synod the ability to hire and fire almost everyone in the national office. In addition, since that time the two “mission boards” are really only responsible for making policy. These changes within the national offices, and some other centralizing changes, were heavily promoted by the “Blue Ribbon Task Force for Synodical Structure and Governance,” by President Gerald Kieschnick—who appointed that task force, and by the “Jesus First” organization.⁵ These same changes were opposed by me⁶ and many others.⁷ “Congregations Matter” should blame President Kieschnick, his Blue Ribbon Task Force, and the “Jesus First” organization for this centralization of authority, not President Harrison or the current LCMS Board of Directors who have to follow what that 2010 convention adopted.

The second question on the “Congregations Matter” mailer argues that the incumbent President and Secretary of the Missouri Synod are proposing that “your regional Concordia University President and Board of Regents be replaced by Synod headquarters control.” That is not true. Whatever President Harrison, Secretary Sias, and the Concordia University System (CUS) board are doing to strengthen cooperation is in compliance with Resolution 7-02B of the 2016 convention whose title states that its purpose is “To Preserve Concordia Colleges and Universities as Institutions of the Church and *Strengthen their Structural Bonds with Synod*” [emphasis added].⁸ The 2016 convention also adopted Resolution 7-03A, which included a number of revised bylaws to enhance the cooperation between the CUS board and the individual colleges and universities.⁹ The President, Secretary, and the CUS board have to follow these resolutions. If they don’t, they are not doing their convention-mandated job.

The third question argues that our Synod’s college in

Selma was “secretly closed” and the Synod’s Hong Kong mission properties were “secretly put up for sale.” It is certainly not true that these things were done in secret. It is certainly not true that President Harrison made these

decisions. The LCMS Board of Directors is “the custodian of all the property of the Synod,” which includes mission properties and college campuses.¹⁰ The closing of any of the CUS campuses is the work of the Concordia University System Board of Directors, which

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These same changes were opposed by me and many others. [See end notes 6 and 7.]

must have prior approval from a 2/3rds majority of the LCMS Board of Directors, PLUS either a 2/3rds majority of the affected college Board of Regents OR a 2/3rds majority of the LCMS Council of Presidents.¹¹ All of this was done in order, according to bylaws, due to financial reasons.

With regard to the Selma college, its troubles have been known and published for some time. In the September 2012 *Lutheran Witness*, the Synod reported that out of a student body of 719 students at Selma, only 6 were enrolled as Lutheran teacher candidates, and there were no other students enrolled for other church vocations.¹² In the November 2017 *Lutheran Witness*, the Synod reported that out of a student body of 378 students at Selma, none were enrolled in church vocations.¹³ In the March 2016 *Reporter*, the Synod reported on meetings between the LCMS Board of Directors and the Board of Regents of Selma:

In December [2015], the Board of Regents for Concordia, Selma [CCA], submitted requests and two options to the Synod Board of Directors [BOD] for financially supporting the college. According to the BOD resolution, one of the options proposed by the CCA board was that CCA would “continue as a college under the auspices of the LCMS Bylaws and requirements of the CUS.” The other option proposed

The *Lutheran Clarion*—2019 Convention Issues

We are in our 11th year of the *Clarion* as we strive to present and uphold the truth of God’s Holy Word. We hope to help delegates to the 2019 LCMS Convention by providing them with information on the myriad of issues they will face as they vote. We could use your help.



If you can help with our costs, there’s an enclosed envelope so you can mail your check to Lutheran Concerns Association, 149 Glenview Drive, New Kensington, PA 15068-4921. Do it now. **Thank you!!**

“that CCA would be divested from the LCMS and seek status as [an LCMS] Recognized Service Organization.” Both options called for the LCMS to provide CCA with \$12-18 million “over the next four years.” In response, the BOD resolution makes it clear that “in light of [limited] LCMS revenues, expenses and other missions that need financial support, ... the [national office of the] LCMS does not have the financial resources to provide or commit such financial resources requested by CCA [Concordia College, Selma] over the next four years.”¹⁴

Concordia College, Selma also reported in 2016 to the Synod in Convention that:

Each year Concordia needs an additional \$2–3 million of unrestricted gifts to balance its operating budget. The college is extremely dependent upon such gifts and the Line of Credit. Until these gifts are greatly increased, the college will require additional financial support. All the attempts to depend on tuition revenue, as most of the CUS schools do, is not feasible in Alabama as our student demographic and economic disparity will not support such a business plan.¹⁵

In his *Joy:Fully Lutheran: 1 Thess 5:16-24. A message to the Church* booklet, distributed to the Synod’s districts at their 2018 conventions, President Harrison reported about the closing of Selma. That report noted that the President, the LCMS Board of Directors, and the CUS Board had done everything possible to preserve Selma, but even our Synod’s best financial people said that the school was not financially viable.¹⁶

As to the Hong Kong mission properties, the move of our Asia mission offices from Hong Kong to Taiwan was also made for financial reasons. This decision was also made by the LCMS Board of Directors, not by the President, and was duly reported. The February 2018 *Reporter* observed:

Regional Director [Charles] Ferry said, “The Luther Building [in Taiwan] will serve the entire region and support the operations of [the Synod’s Office of International Mission in] Asia in a way that will be cost effective and make use of the gifts God has given through His church.” The move from Hong Kong also will benefit the missionary families relocating to Taiwan. Hong Kong is one of the most expensive places in the world to live and work. At the same time, the financial and business news website *Business Insider* ranks Taiwan among the top places to live for expatriates, based on quality of life, affordability and excellence of medical care. And with two major airports on the island, Taiwan also provides very cost-effective travel throughout the region. In short, Taiwan will reduce the financial burden on our missionaries, who now will spend less time raising their support and more time doing the work of the church.¹⁷

And this is why we are supposed to be opposed to the leadership of President Matthew Harrison? Are we supposed to elect someone else because our missionaries will be getting better care at lower cost? This was not even the President’s decision, for blame or credit.

The fourth question on the “Congregations Matter” mailer argues that LCMS officers, board members, and other leaders are “tap-dancing” around issues of transparency, finances, and membership loss nationally. That is not true. In Spring 2011, President Harrison and his staff initiated an annual “State of the Synod” report, which comes out annually in the *Lutheran Witness*.¹⁸ These issues contain *the best reporting we have ever had* in terms of finances, statistics, operations, challenges, opportunities, membership gains and losses, etc., etc. They are filled with graphics, charts, etc., that report and explain much better to the “man and woman in the pew” than anything we have published in the past. I know. I used to be the Director of the Concordia Historical Institute, and I supervised its archives and library, which contains everything the Missouri Synod has ever published. “State of the Synod” is the *best* we have ever done in reporting and transparency, bar none! My thanks to all the editors, authors, and staff who do this work! I keep every issue for reference.

In addition to the “State of the Synod” issues, President Harrison and his staff furthered their efforts to be transparent and in-

formative to the members of our synod by initiating *Lutherans Engage*,¹⁹ which is a quarterly magazine chock-full of great photos and text, illustrating

the wonderful stories of mission, charity, and outreach that congregations, individuals, and agencies of our Synod are doing together for the Lord’s Kingdom. Then there are the improvements to the *Lutheran Witness* and *Reporter*, especially the color inserts in the *Reporter* that have been frequent during Harrison’s administration. Plus everything that you can imagine about the Synod—board minutes, board reports, periodicals, statistics—can be accessed for free, and easily, at the Synod’s website: www.lcms.org

As to gradual membership loss, this is a significant example of how our president has been open and honest, as he has been confronting a malady that affects all denominations in the United States. Our LCMS leaders are addressing this pressing issue carefully and wisely.

Concordia Journal, our Saint Louis seminary’s journal, just published a research paper on the topic.²⁰ In the previously mentioned *Joy:Fully Lutheran* report in 2018 by President Harrison, he spent about a third of his report on the matter of demographics and how that is affecting our congregations.²¹ Prior to that, President Harrison and his staff worked with Pastor Heath Curtis to do or contract out original research in this area. The results were published in the December 2016 *Journal of Lutheran Mission*²² and are available for free online. This is not “tap-dancing.” This is facing the “elephant in the room,” taking that “bull by the horns,” and wrestling him to the ground. President Harrison gets full credit for that!

“Congregations Matter” has misrepresented a number of issues and situations, in order to bring undeserved discredit to LCMS officers and board members.

It is clear, then, that “Congregations Matter” has misrepresented a number of issues and situations, in order to bring undeserved discredit to LCMS officers and board members. If the two candidates whose faces and names are on the “Congregations Matter” mailer were truly worthy of office, they would publicly renounce that mailer, its “Congregations Matter” authors, and publicly correct the misrepresentations. They need to do this in order to maintain their own reputation as Christian gentlemen, as competent leaders, and as pastors of Christ’s church.

The Rev. Martin R. Noland, Ph.D.

Grace Lutheran Church, San Mateo, CA

- 1 Statistics from *The Lutheran Annual* (2019), page 793.
- 2 See <http://congregationsmatter.org/first-vice-president-and-regional-vice-president-nominees> (all websites and webpages in the present article were accessed on January 30, 2019, except for those listed in endnote #5 because that website is defunct).
- 3 For the Constitution, Bylaws, and Articles of Incorporation of the LCMS, see the 2016 Handbook here: <https://www.lcms.org/Document.fdoc?src=lcm&id=4507>
- 4 See C.S. Meyer, ed., *Moving Frontiers* (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1964), 149-151 (1854 Const. Chap. II and Chap. IV.A.9).
- 5 For example, the following articles were published at the Jesus First website: Jonathan Coyne, “Task Force Reports Work to Date,” *Jesus First* (Oct. 2009); Jesus First Publication Team, “Task Force on Structure Listens to Feedback,” *Jesus First* (November 2009); David S. Luecke, “Re-structure has no ‘Hidden Agenda’” (January 2010); Charles S. Mueller, Sr., “Changes in Congregations Should Lead to Changes in Synod’s Structure” *Jesus First* (March 2010); David S. Luecke, “Proposed Constitutional Changes Clarify That Mission is Fundamental” *Jesus First* (March 2010); David S. Luecke, “A Wise Change in Constitution and By-laws,” *Jesus First* (April 2010); Jonathan Coyne, “Synod Has Had Effective Mission Leadership” *Jesus First* (June 2010); and Charles S. Mueller, Sr., “Change in the LCMS Has Had a Noble History” *Jesus First* (June 2010). The Jesus First website (www.jesusfirst.net) is now defunct and to my knowledge the articles are no longer available online. The printed newsletter form of these articles should be available in some Lutheran libraries and in the archives at Concordia Historical Institute.
- 6 See for example my articles: Martin R. Noland, “Delegate Representation and the Blue Ribbon Plan,” *Lutheran Clarion* 1 no. 2 (November 2008):2-3; Martin R. Noland, “The Secret History of the Blue Ribbon Plan (updated),” *Lutheran Clarion* 2 no. 5 (April 2010):5-6; and Martin R. Noland, “The Blue Ribbon Plan #18 and the Spoils System,” *Lutheran Clarion* 2 #6 (May 2010):1-2 (see www.lutheranclarion.org/newsletter.html). Other articles that I authored on this topic were published on the website of *Brothers of John the Steadfast* from January 2009 to July 2010 at www.steadfastlutherans.org
- 7 For articles in the *Lutheran Clarion* opposed to the Blue Ribbon Plan, see for example: Christian A. Preus, “Task Force on Structure: Don’t Get Rid of the Program Boards,” *Lutheran Clarion* 1 no. 2 (November 2008):3-4; Richard A. Bolland, “The Appearance of Impropriety: How the Process of Changing the Constitution and Bylaws of the Synod Truncate Real Discussion,” *Lutheran Clarion* 1 no. 2 (November 2008):6-7; David Adams, “Beware of the Unintended Consequences of Electing Synodical Delegates at District Conventions,” *Lutheran Clarion* (January 2009):4; Ronald Feuerhahn, “A Temporal or Ecclesiastical Structure?” *Lutheran Clarion* 1 no. 4 (March 2009):1-2; Christian A. Preus, “Delegate Selection: An Exceptionally Simple Solution,” *Lutheran Clarion* 1 no. 4 (March 2009):2-3; Jon C. Ferguson, “Consolidation of Power is the Main Thrust of Task Force Proposals,” *Lutheran Clarion* 2 no. 2 (September 2009):6-7; Christian A. Preus, “President Kieschnick’s Task Force Recommendation: Power to the President,” *Lutheran Clarion* 2 no. 3 (January 2010):1-2; Jon C. Ferguson, “Top Down Work on a Bottom Up Denomination: A Look at the Final Report of The Blue Ribbon Task Force on Synod Structure and Governance,” *Lutheran Clarion* special issue (February 2010), 1-5; Edwin S. Suelflow, “Musings from a Retired Pastor and District President, Our Church Fathers, and the BRTFSSG,” *Lutheran Clarion* 2 no. 4 (March 2010):1-2; Christian A. Preus, “President Kieschnick’s Task Force Recommendation: Ambiguity v. Clarity,” *Lutheran Clarion* 2 no. 4 (March 2010):3-4; Thomas Queck, “Circuit Realignment: What Is There to Restore?” *Lutheran Clarion* 2 no. 5 (April 2010):1-2; Christian A. Preus, “President Kieschnick’s Task Force Recommendation #18: ‘But that is not what it does’” *Lutheran Clarion* 2 no. 5 (April 2010):2-3; James A. Douthwaite, “Flawed Assumptions Produce Flawed Results,” *Lutheran Clarion* 2 no. 5 (April 2010):4-5; David Hawk, “Political or Pastoral Viewpoint?” *Lutheran Clarion* 2 no. 7 (June 2010):1-2; Christian A. Preus, “President Kieschnick’s Task Force Structure Proposals: Now What Do We Do?” *Lutheran Clarion* 2 no. 7 (June 2010): 1-3; Richard A. Bolland, “The 2010 Synodical Convention: A Voter’s Guide,” *Lutheran Clarion* 2 no. 7 (June 2010):7-8; Christian Preus, “Task Force on Structure Recommendations: A Summary of the Problems,” *Lutheran Clarion* 2 no. 8 (July 2010):1-2; and David Mueller, “A Delegate’s Reflections on the Blue Ribbon Task Force Proposals” *Lutheran Clarion* 2 no. 8 (July 2010):5-6 (see www.lutheranclarion.org/newsletter.html). The website of *Brothers of John the Steadfast* also ran many articles opposing the Blue Ribbon Task Force. The most hard-hitting article was, in my opinion, this one: Mollie Ziegler-Hemingway, “Not a Consolidation of Power?” *Brothers of John the Steadfast* (April 24, 2010), see <http://steadfastlutherans.org/2010/04/not-a-consolidation-of-power>. A summary of other articles on the web opposing the Blue Ribbon proposals can be found here: <http://steadfastlutherans.org/2010/05/great-stuff-found-on-the-web-stand-firm-index-of-brtfssg-articles>.
- 8 See the 2016 Convention Proceedings, pp. 173-174 at: <https://www.lcms.org/Document.fdoc?src=lcm&id=4344>
- 9 See Resolution 7-03A, in 2016 Convention Proceedings, pp. 175-177 at: <https://www.lcms.org/Document.fdoc?src=lcm&id=4344>
- 10 See 2016 Handbook, *The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod* (Saint Louis: LCMS, 2016), p. 114 (bylaw 3.3.4.7) and p. 23 (bylaw 1.2.1 (q)).
- 11 See 2016 Handbook, *The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod*, p. 128 (bylaw 3.6.6.5 (h)) and p. 163 (bylaw 3.10.6.4 (i) 6).
- 12 N.a., “Concordia University System,” *Lutheran Witness* 132 no. 9 (September 2012):29.
- 13 N.a., “Concordia University System: Against the Tide,” *Lutheran Witness* 136 no. 11 (November 2017):26.
- 14 See Paula Schlueter Ross, “Board Adopts Resolution ‘to Support Concordia College, Alabama,’” *Reporter* (March 3,

- 2016), see <https://blogs.lcms.org/2016/resolution-to-support-concordia-college-alabama>
- 15 See 2016 Convention Workbook: Reports and Overtures. 66th Regular Convention of The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, July 9-14, 2016 (Saint Louis: LCMS, 2016), 80; see <http://www.lcms.org/Document.fdoc?src=lcm&id=4086>
 - 16 See Matthew Harrison, *Joy:Fully Lutheran: 1 Thess 5:16-24. A message to the Church about the challenges we face and how to face them* (St. Louis: LCMS, 2018), 40-41.
 - 17 See Roy Askins, "Whether in Hong Kong or Taiwan, the Synod's Asia mission doesn't change," *Reporter* (February 5, 2018), see <https://blogs.lcms.org/2018/whether-hong-kong-taiwan-Synods-asia-mission-doesnt-change>
 - 18 So far, these issues in the *Lutheran Witness* are: May 2011, September 2012, September 2013, November 2014, November 2015, November 2016, November 2017, and November 2018; they can be viewed online here: <https://blogs.lcms.org/category/lutheran-witness/lutheran-witness-archives>
 - 19 For online issues of *Lutherans Engage*, see: <https://engage.lcms.org>
 - 20 Mark Kiessling and Julianna Shultz, "The Search for Young People: 2017 Research of Millenials and the LCMS," *Concordia Journal* 44 no. 4 (Fall 2018):19-32.
 - 21 See Harrison, *Joy:Fully Lutheran*,18-33.
 - 22 See special issue of *Journal of Lutheran Mission* 3 no. 3 (December 2016) here: <https://blogs.lcms.org/2016/journal-of-lutheran-mission-december-2016>

What has Wichita Wrought?

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this faith, the ministry of teaching the Gospel and administering the sacraments was instituted." The ques-

tion of leadership in the public worship continued. ⁱⁱⁱ

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For example, shortly after the Solid Declaration (1580), Abraham Calov (1612 -1686) in his epic writing, *A System of Theological Commonplaces*, wrote, "Although God truly is able to manifest His Son to us by immediate illu-

mination, as He did for the apostles, however it has pleased Him through the foolishness of preaching to give salvation to those who believe. Therefore, the ministry of the word is absolutely necessary according to His divine will." Calov found that an exclusive ordained ministry was rejected by the Socinians, in the *Rachovian Catechism*, and by some Dutch Arminians. *Rachovi-*

ans demanded the church accept the preaching of those who did not have a legitimate or regular call. ^{iv} This kind of Post-Reformation Pentecostalism is common yet today, where charisma and zeal for God supposedly demand the people's attention.

Characteristically, *The Rachovian Catechism* stated: "They go forth of their own accord, excited by a regard for the divine glory and the salvation of men, for the purpose of regulating and settling the church, and excel in these two qualifications, innocence of life, and aptness to teach, they ought deservedly to have just authority among all men." ^v

Unfortunately, this reductionism of the "office of the ministry" attempts to erode the efficacy of the office in favor of officiousness by those who elevate themselves, and launch and assault into churches with self-certification and self-recommended zeal. However, this is not a charismatic self-declaration one may find within The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. For over 500 years, we Missouri Lutherans have embraced the understanding that the Bible's view of the ministry is quite different. The ministry is an office, which God bestows on His church as a gift through a proper Call into a divine institution.

God uses the Church to Call ministers. Our pastors are Called by God through the Church, and not by self-appointment. The local church confers what is God's Call on her ministers so they may serve her according to God's word, will, and command. However, through the 1970's and 80's, there were several congregations experiencing difficulty in providing for or securing pastors. While there were some laity who faithfully served congregations as deacons, questions persisted about the practice. Opponents questioned whether it was biblical? What about supervision? Is there a divine call? Is it or could it ever be recognized by the wider

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Church?

As a result, The Lay Worker Study Committee was appointed by Synod in 1987 to report to the 1989 Synod convention on options that would address those growing concerns. After hearing the study report, the Convention approved 1989 Resolution 3-05B, authorizing districts to train, examine, and license laity for Word and Sacrament ministry in emergencies and temporary service. (See Appendix A) ^{vi} [The Appendices for this article are at the LCA website at <http://lutheranclarion.org/> → Newsletter → Document Library.]

Since the Synod's 1989 Convention, delegates in 1992, 1995, 2004, 2007, 2010, 2013, and 2016 wrestled with the topic of licensing lay deacons, but without satisfactory resolution. As a result, disharmony and dissension have prevailed for over a quarter of a century. Some of the 35 Districts of the LCMS had already used laity in Word and Sacrament ministry, but the practice raised concerns: There were no Synod guidelines that defined the parameters of how or under what circumstance laity could conduct corporate worship.

The Proceedings of the 1989 Convention Resolution noted that Scriptures and our Lutheran Confessions teach that there is only one divinely instituted office in the church; that is, the Office of the Public Ministry, a pastor, citing AC V. ^{vii} The Report stated that, "Except in exceptional circumstances or in emergencies," the Commission on Theology and Church Relations, 1981, noted the distinctive functions of the pastoral office are to be carried out only by those who have received a regular call (AC XIV). ^{viii} Further, prompted by the Catholic Refutation of the Augustana, the Reformers responded with Apology XIV that made it clear that AC XIV explicitly denoted the Rite of Ordination. ^{ix} After a revision by the Floor Committee, the 1989 Synod Convention passed Resolution 3-05B including the Resolve that stated, "Resolved, That the recommendations of the Lay Worker Study Committee (Section VII of its report), as amended, be adopted as follows:" This answers the question: **What has Wichita Wrought?**

The 1987 Lay Worker Committee recommended:

- A) That Districts and other entities be assisted by the Synod through the Board for Parish Services in developing training programs for lay workers which are for a specific context and are locally available. ^x
- B) That the training of lay workers by Districts and other entities for service within the District be encouraged

"The diaconate is the ministry, not of reading the Gospel and the Epistle, as is the present practice, but of distributing the church aid to the poor, so that the priests may be relieved of the burden of temporal matters and may give themselves more freely to prayer and the Word...as we read in Acts 5."

Martin Luther ("Luther's Works," American Edition, 22)

and that minimum standards, including personal qualities, skills, theological preparation, and academic training be included. ^{xi}

- C) That the title deacon be established by which a layman would be addressed while he is **temporarily** serving in Word and Sacrament ministry in exceptional circumstances **or in emergencies**.^{xi} This title was to distinguish him from an ordained pastor; and, only in exceptional circumstances or in emergencies."^{xii}
- D) That God has instituted the office of the public ministry (AC V) and that "nobody should publicly teach or preach or administer the sacraments in the church without a regular call" (AC XIV). Therefore, only those who hold the office of the public ministry should exercise the specific and distinctive functions of the office. Yet the Report went on to state, "However, when no pastor is available, and in the absence of any specific Scriptural directives to the contrary, congregations may arrange for the performance of these distinctive functions by qualified individuals," ^{xiii}
- E) The selection of these lay leaders should be approved of in advance by the District President, who assured that the individual possesses qualities which would commend him for this ongoing role (e.g., spirituality, exemplary Christian life, excellent standing in the congregation, good communications skills, and a readiness to grow and learn). Further, where there is no pastor available to lead worship and preach regularly, arrangements may be made by a congregation or the responsible board, in consultation with the District President, to secure the services of a layman, licensed to preach and serve under the supervision of an ordained pastor; ^{xiv}
- F) That Baptism be administered by a supervising pastor or another rostered pastor. If not possible, the licensed layman will administer it; and that the supervising pastor will normally administer Holy Communion. However, the Report stated, "in exceptional circumstances," when no ordained clergy is available and the congregation would otherwise be deprived of the Sacrament for a prolonged period of time, the licensed layman will preside, authorized by the congregation and by the supervising pastor and District President's approval; ^{xv} and finally
- G) The administration of the Office of the Keys by means of the personal pronouncement of the absolution as it pertains to church discipline, and possible excommunication, ought not be carried out by those who do not hold the office of public ministry [at any time]. ^{xvi}

After wrestling with the matter for more than 25 years of **What has Wichita Wrought?**, the Synod's 2013 Resolution 406-A established a Task Force to take on the assignment of "regularizing" a systematic way of defining what Wichita 305-B failed to codify. Here, it is important to note that on the subject of the diaconate, Martin Luther wrote, "The diaconate is the ministry, not of reading the Gospel and the Epistle, as is the present practice, but of

distributing the church aid to the poor, so that the priests may be relieved of the burden of temporal matters and may give themselves more freely to prayer and the Word. For this was the purpose of the institution of the diaconate, as we read in Acts 5.”^{xvii}

Scripture and *The Lutheran Confessions*^{xviii} clearly distinguish between believers who are members of the Royal Priesthood, who come before God to offer their spiritual sacrifices;^{xix} and those whom Christ Calls into a specific office with specific responsibilities to His Church. Yet, the financial, geographic, and cultural challenges to congregations continued to press for consideration of the service of deacons for legitimate, emergency, and exceptional situations. Yet, Luther in his desire to maintain good order, observed that “Emergency knows no law,”^{xx} that is, an emergency situation need not define the general usage of means to address an emergency. In Holy Scripture, I Peter 2:5, 9 and Revelation 1:6 and 5:10 declare the privilege and responsibility of all Christians to proclaim Christ.

But, in regard to the distinction between a Royal Priesthood and Called ministers, Augsburg Confession, Article XIV uses the Latin term *rite vocatus – ordentlich Beruf* in the German Concordia Triglotta “rightly called,” meaning that no one may preach or administer the sacraments in public worship without being duly Called in the proper Rite of the Church.^{xxi}

How do we know this? Dr. Robert Preus stated, “As the practice continues after the 1989 convention and nothing is done to return to the doctrine and practice of AC XIV, our synod in effect teaches by its practice that one can publically preach the Gospel without being *rite vocatus*, the very practice and doctrine forbidden by AC XIV.”^{xxii} Furthermore, Holy Scripture describes the office of the pastor and the role of laity.^{xxiii} For this reason, our beloved Synod has consistently confessed both the Royal Priesthood and the office of public ministry to speak the Gospel, but in their biblical and respective vocations.

Preparing and Calling pastors occurs when three elements are evident: examination, Rightly Called, and public appointment or recognition, that is, Ordination. Ordination is the “traditional” way men are appointed to the pastoral office and recognized by the Church at large. Ordination affirms God’s Call through the congregation on behalf of the greater Church. Yet, Ordination gives no special character or powers. It is an apostolic custom and practice. Nevertheless, this important apostolic custom describes what the 1981 CTCR document called “transparochial” as Procedures and Nomenclature that signify recognition beyond the local congregation.^{xxiv} That of a Synod-wide critical recognition is missing for deacons under Wichita 3-05B! Their work may be approved and recognized by

...it was essential that Resolution 13-02A’s implementation would recognize exceptional and special circumstances that would not force any church or missions to close.

some, but not by all – hence the dynamic tension that interrupts the definition of unity in the Synod.

Synod’s Resolution 13-02A (2016 Convention) recommended to “Regularize” deacons who routinely preach and administer the sacraments who could apply for a colloquy to be certified for pastoral ministry. It respects the character, commitment, training, supervision and past service of the deacons. Colloquy ensures the consistent use of the Synod’s regular certification process for those in pastoral ministry. Upon certification, they would be Called by a congregation, ordained into the Office of the Public Ministry, installed and placed on Synod’s Roster as a Specific Ministry Pastor. The colloquy process ensured the unqualified subscription to our Lutheran Confessions and the Synod’s regular examination process for those who hold the office pastoral ministry.

The colloquy interviews also affirm that the deacons are, in the words of Scripture, “above reproach” and “able to teach” (I Timothy 3:2). The Task Force commends district lay-training programs and the many lay servants who have sought theological education and demonstrated a desire to serve in their congregations to assist pastors in the congregation’s ministries and missions.

When the 406-A Task Force (2013 Synod Convention) published their report, numerous responses from various individuals, pastors, licensed lay deacons, mission organizations, and district presidents were received. Both faculties of our seminaries and the CTCR commended the theological framework of the Report. The Task Force listened carefully to suggestions to the Report, forwarding every concern to Floor Committee 13. Those changes were useful for faithful convention discussion, decisions, and harmony among us.

The Task Force discovered that there were over 500 men and women functioning in varying roles as deacon throughout Synod. Of that number, 331 men in ten districts were serving in regular or occasional preaching and administering the Sacraments. The remaining 194 men and women assisted in congregations in various other ways, but not preaching or administering the sacraments. Not all Districts of Synod chose to utilize deacons. Most concerning, however, of the 331 serving in Word and Sacrament ministry, several would never have been admitted to an LCMS Seminary because of limitations to their eligibility. (See Appendix B)

The main purpose of Resolution 13-02A was to recognize men who serve regularly in Word and Sacrament ministry as certified pastors, thereby avoiding the confusing demarcation between laity and pastor. The Resolution recommended discontinuing District licensing of new deacons for Word and Sacrament ministry after January 1, 2018. But it further recommended continued training for men and women to assist in the work of the pastoral ministry.

Resolution 13-02A encouraged future pastoral and congregational needs are to be filled by means of one of the seven existing Seminary training programs: Traditional, Alternate Route, SMP, SMP Colloquy, Ethnic Immigrant

Institute of Theology, Hispanic Studies, or Cross-cultural Ministry tracks. (See Appendix C)

It also recognized that allowance must be made for individual and congregation exceptions that could be granted by the plenary of the Council of Presidents. But, it was essential that Resolution 13-02A's implementation would recognize exceptional and special circumstances that would not force any church or missions to close. Those Deacons who applied for colloquy prior to July 1, 2018, would remain licensed and able to serve until their colloquy process was completed. By the end of the first quarter of 2019, every deacon should be given the opportunity to complete his colloquy interview and process.

The Resolution made provisions that Synod would commit \$40,000 in 2016 and \$150,000 per year for each year after to assist deacons in the colloquy transition to Specific Ministry Pastors. Any man who did not meet the minimum years of experience or age requirements, or receive a personal exemption, could access that funding.

The Resolution commended the continuation of Districts to prepare, credential, and hold accountable laity for various areas of service in the church—yet exclusive of regular preaching and officiating at the Sacraments—that is, serving as de facto pastors. Currently, laity who are NOT in regular public Word and Sacrament ministry may offer a variety of assisting services under direct pastoral supervision, thus creating a distinction between pastor and laity, while embracing our Confessions.

There will continue to be various circumstances that cannot be ignored. There will be exceptional times when a layman is need for emergency preaching and administration of the Sacraments. The Resolution did not ignore those possibilities. At the same time, the Resolution recognized that Christian outreach is a rapidly increasing need! But, many Christians are afraid or uninvolved in any witnessing. The Resolution also encourages identifying individuals for specific evangelism training to equip laity and called church workers alike.

What has Wichita Wrought? Resolution 13-02A is criticized by those who say it went too far to restrict ministry of the laity. Others criticize Resolution 13-02A for not recognizing the office of deacon as an auxiliary to the pastoral office. Still others criticize Resolution 13-02A for not going far enough and completely eliminate anyone from Word and Sacrament ministry other than seminary trained general pastors.

However, the elimination of the confusion over the conducting of the public administration of Word and Sacrament is minimized. The dissension over the use of non-ordained laity to publicly preach and administer the Sacraments is lessened. Resolution 13-02A allows us to return to the Confessions of the Church. Yet, we know the 2019 Synod Convention will have Overtures to overturn or redefine 13-02A with delegates wanting more to say about historical and practical use of laity in the pastoral role.

We will, however, maintain our efforts toward unity and AC V of the Confession that states, "To obtain such faith,

God instituted the office of ministry—that is, provide the Gospel and the Sacraments." And, that the office of ministry is (AC XIV) given *rite vocatus* – the Greater Church's proper order through the tradition of ordination (AP XIV). This is what Wichita has finally wrought. May God preserve His beloved Church.

Rev. Dr. Roger Paavola
President, Mid-South District

- i. My thanks to Rev. Larry Vogel and Rev. Russell Sommerfeld for their assistance compiling information from the 2013 4-06A Task Force and the 2016 13-02A Committee.
- ii. *The Book of Concord*, Fortress Press, ed. Theodore G. Tappert, 36
- iii. *Ibid.*, 31.
- iv. Kenneth G. Appold, *Abraham Calov's Doctrine of Voatio in its Systematic Context, (Syncretismus Calxtinus (1653) and Harmonia Calixtinohaeretica 1655)*, J. C. B. Mohr, Tübingen, 1998.
- v. *Ibid.*
- vi. Appendix A; *Proceedings of the 1989 Convention of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod*, 111-14.
- vii. *Ibid.*
- viii. *Ibid.*
- ix. *The Book of Concord*, 36, 214.
- x. *Proceedings....*, 111-112
- xi. *Ibid.*, 112.
- xii. *Ibid.*
- xiii. *Ibid.*
- xiv. *Ibid.*, 112-113
- xv. *Ibid.*, 113
- xvi. *Ibid.*
- xvii. *Luther's Works*, AE 22.
- xviii. *The Book of Concord*, 331.69.
- xix. St Paul speaks of this ministry in I Timothy 1:12 and 2:7 how he was appointed to this office by Christ.
- xx. Luther, "Sermon on John 3," AE 22:338. Luther is never reckless with this dictum, however. Rather, he protested vigorously against those who accused him of abolishing the ministry or confusing it with the priesthood of believers. "You also lie that I have made all laymen bishops, priests, and spiritual in such a way that they may exercise the office without a call. But, as godly as you are, you conceal the fact that I added that no one should undertake this office without a call unless it be an extreme emergency." "Answer to the Hyperchristian, Hyperspiritual, and Hyperlearned Book by Goat Emser in Leipzig—Including Some Thoughts Concerning His Companion, the Fool Murner," AE 32:174.
- xxi. Concordia Triglotta, Concordia Publishing Company, St Louis, 1921, 48.
- xxii. Robert D. Preus, "The Doctrine of the Call in the Confessions and Lutheran Orthodoxy," in *Church and Ministry Today: Three Confessional Lutheran Essays*, John A. Maxfield, editor (St. Louis: The Luther Academy, 2001). One comment included, "This fine essay covers the doctrine of the divine call in a comprehensive fashion through the following outline: a) The Unity of Doctrine and Practice; b) The Call; c) The Call is From God; d) God Calls Through the Church; e) The Necessity of the Call; f) The Office; g)

The Call Process; h) Conclusions, The Contemporary Situation (Aberrations, Excesses, Evaluation, Diagnosis, Prognosis... This is an excellent Lutheran theological scholarship presented in Dr. Preus's essay, and heretofore commends it for careful study to any person with interest in this topic sufficient to read this footnote in a Minority Opinion along with the CTCR Report. The reader will find therein helpful correctives to some of the latter document's more speculative conclusions and Lutheran Orthodoxy"

- xxiii. Acts 20:28 and Ephesians 4:11, ESV.
- xxiv. The Ministry: Offices, Procedures, and Nomenclature: A Report of the Commission on Theology and Church Relations of The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, September 1981.

Walther as Churchman

The article below, by the sainted Dr. Edwin S. Suelflow, was extracted from *For the Life of the World*, October 2003, Volume Seven, Number Four, pages 4-6. *For the Life of the World* is a publication of the Concordia Theological Seminary Press, Fort Wayne, IN.

Walther Memorial Lutheran Church, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, is the only congregation in The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod which bears the name of its first president. It was my privilege to serve this congregation as pastor for 29 years. A portrait of Dr. Walther hangs in the narthex of the church—a tribute to his memory, also a reminder of the doctrinal heritage this churchman left for us as a congregation and as a Synod.

In 1987, under the encouragement of the Lutheran Heritage Committee of the Synod, special services were held during the Reformation season of that year to call to mind, with thanksgiving to God, the legacy C.F.W. Walther left for the Missouri Synod. For this special observance, the Heritage Committee suggested the words recorded in Jude, v. 3, as the text for the sermon on that day: "I urge you to fight for the faith once entrusted to the holy people."

No one will deny that as a churchman, C.F.W. Walther contended for the faith. History records his valiant efforts, even in the face of tremendous odds. This was the situation in Perry County, Missouri, when the Saxon immigration people lost heart over the scandal surrounding their leader, Martin Stephan. Walther was

...we do well to think about our life in the church and ask ourselves:

- **Are we following in [Walther's] footsteps?**
- **Is adherence to the Word of God as important to us as it was to Walther?**
- **Do we place human reason in subjection to the Word of God?**
- **Do we always say "thus saith the Lord"?**

forced, under the circumstance, to go to the Scriptures to clarify his position on the doctrine of church and ministry. With the Holy Spirit's help, his position prevailed; it saved the immigration from failure, and provided sound theological foundation for the Missouri Synod today. The LCMS Convention of 2001 reviewed and reaffirmed this position.

Later, when Walther was president of the seminary in St. Louis, his concern for the training of pastors resulted in the special evening conversations he held with students on the subject of the proper distinction between Law and Gospel. Even today, most pastors have in their personal library a copy of these theses formulated by Walther.

His *Pastoraltheologie* contains a wealth of theological literature, demonstrating his conviction that the Word of God must speak to specific situations in the life of the Church.

When the many immigrants from Europe in the 1800s formed a number of different synods in America, Walther, the churchman, sought earnestly to gather like-minded, confessional Lutherans together, an effort which culminated eventually in the formation of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. His prolific writings in the *Der Lutheraner* and *Lehre Und Wehre*, which addressed contemporary issues on the basis of God's Word, and his voluminous correspondence all contributed to the effort of establishing a Synod based solidly on the Sacred Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions.

Surely Walther followed the encouragement of the Apostle "to fight for the faith once entrusted to the holy people."

We recognize the God blessed efforts of Walther in the history of our Missouri Synod. Reflecting on this, we do well to think about our life in the church and ask ourselves: Are we following in his footsteps? Is adherence to the Word of God as important to us as it was to Walther? Do we place human reason in subjection to the Word of God? Do we always say "thus saith the Lord"?

How would Walther see our Synod today? How would he address the problems that cause divisions among us? How would he have dealt with the Yankee Stadium affair? What would he say to the Council of Presidents to encourage faithfulness to the Word of God among the pastors of the Synod in their preaching and in their practice? What would he say about the church growth movement? About contemporary worship forms? About women's ordination? About the Concordia University System? About the Pastoral Leadership Institute? About the financial crises in the Synod? And the many other problems which are causing debate and even division among us?

Granted, Walther lived in a different time from ours. These differences are obvious. Yet, the basic, fundamental problem for people living in any century has not changed. We are still born with original sin; we still need the regeneration given in Holy Baptism; we still need daily repentance; we still need to hear the absolution; we still need the Sacrament of the Lord's body and blood for the assurance of forgiveness; we still need to hear the saving Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. We still need, as the old Lutheran Hour sign proclaimed, "A changeless Christ for a

changing world.”

So what has changed? If he were a churchman in the Missouri Synod today, Walther might well ask: Why do you place so much emphasis on your convention resolutions, and synodical bylaws, decisions of the Committee on Constitutional Matters, and decisions of dispute resolution panels? Where is the Word of God in the summary judgments you make to decide issues facing the church? Why do you think that being “user friendly” in your worship forms will “grow” the church? Why do you allow the culture in which you live to dictate to the church what it should do— isn’t it the other way around—the church is to influence the culture? Why are numbers seemingly more important than faithfulness in preaching the Word and administering the Sacraments according to their institution by Christ?

Walther, the churchman, would encourage us “to fight for the faith once entrusted to the holy people.” “The faith” is something that has been given to us by the Holy Spirit working through God’s Word and the Sacraments. It is not something we can claim as having come from within ourselves, something we decided upon or sought after because it sounded good to us. Neither is it merely an emotional experience. No, “the faith” is a gift from God—the gift which makes it possible for us to receive eternal life in heaven after death. “The faith” is centered in Jesus Christ, the Son of God, Who came according to God’s plan to pay the ransom price God had demanded for sin—your sin and mine—as He suffered and died on the cross at Calvary, then rose again from the dead to prove that God the Father had accepted the sacrifice of His Son for the sins of the world.

Walther’s primary goal was to give all glory to God, as a humble servant of the Lord. He was one of those distinguished churchmen whom God sends to His Church on earth at various times and in various places to address the needs of the Church in a forceful, yet evangelical manner. Our pastors and our leaders in the church could well follow the example of Walther, keeping before their eyes at all times the Christ centered Gospel and the integrity of Lutheranism as detailed in our historic Lutheran Confessions.

Dr. Edwin S. Suelflow

At the time of his death in late 2018, Dr. Suelflow was 94 years old. He graduated from Concordia Theological Seminary, Saint Louis, in 1948, and he was ordained in September of that year. He went on to serve a congregation in Wauneta, NE (vicarage), several congregations in South Dakota; and then Adell, WI, Franklin, NE, and Milwaukee, WI (29 years at Walther Memorial Lutheran, which merged with Sherman Park Lutheran in 2012). Dr. Suelflow was President of the South Wisconsin District for six years (1988-1994).

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Bless the Lord: GIVE HIM THANKS

Psalm 103:2-3

The article below, used with permission, is from the November 2018 issue of the Indiana District News insert in The Lutheran Witness.

The psalmist exclaims “Bless the Lord.” A blessing is a good thing from God. When someone is blessed, it means he or she has received a good thing from God. Since it is God who singlehandedly blesses, for us to say “Bless the Lord” seems a little strange. How is it that we bless the only One who can truly give blessings? Yet at least 26 times in the Psalms alone, we observe God’s holy writers composing verses that bless the Lord.

To “Bless the Lord” can be seen as holding a mirror in front of God. Such a mirror is uniquely in the hearts of those who have come to believe in God as the sole source of every blessing. It is like saying: “You shower us with good things, and now recognizing these blessings, our hearts and mouths simply reflect — like a mirror — the acknowledgment of these blessings back to you. And when we bless you, it is only a reflection of your blessings upon us.” Thus, to bless the Lord was to gratefully reflect a list of the gifts back at the Giver.

Two reasons to bless the Lord

In Ps. 103:2-3, the psalmist presents two foundational reasons to bless the Lord:

“Bless the Lord, O my soul, ... who forgives all your iniquity, who heals all your diseases.”

For what does my soul first bless the Lord? For forgiveness! Indeed, the Christian reflects back to God the firm belief—and thanksgiving—that for Christ’s sake we are forgiven. From that foundational fountain of forgiveness, we are showered with our Lord’s love, His reconciliation and His gracious gift of life eternal.

The psalmist likewise recognizes God as the one who blesses with daily bread. The psalmist’s sampling of this daily bread is the blessing of healing. Whenever God “heals our diseases,” it is a bountiful blessing of “bread” for which we “bless the Lord” (give Him thanks).

So what about the times when the bread of healing is not there, when that final physical frailty filches my life? I fall back on that first blessing, forgiveness. Bless the Lord—am forgiven and thankfully nothing can separate me from the Father’s love in Christ!

To ‘Bless the Lord’ can be seen as holding a mirror in front of God. Such a mirror is uniquely in the hearts of those who have come to believe in God as the sole source of every blessing.

Rev. Dr. Daniel Brege
President, Indiana District

To ‘Bless the Lord’ can be seen as holding a mirror in front of God. Such a mirror is uniquely in the hearts of those who have come to believe in God as the sole source of every blessing.

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