

NALC leaders observe Reformation anniversary in Wittenberg, Germany

By Pastor David Wendel

Assistant to the Bishop for Ministry and Ecumenism

“When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said ‘Repent’ (Matthew 4:17), he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance.” — Martin Luther (First of the 95 Theses)

On Oct. 31, 1517 — the Eve of the Festival of All Saints — Dr. Martin Luther posted 95 statements intended for academic debate. While addressing the sale of indulgences, they focus on repentance and forgiveness, sin and grace, and Jesus Christ and his death and resurrection for us and our salvation.

Is there such a thing as cheap grace? Can one purchase a piece of paper granting forgiveness of sins? Are there good works which can earn grace and forgiveness?

As Luther stated, God’s intention is that the entire life of the believer should be one of repentance for the sake of forgiveness. With the posting of the theses on the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany (the bulletin board of the university), Luther ignited a firestorm that came to be called the Reformation.

Oct. 31, 2017, marked the 500th anniversary of that important date in the history of the world.

Present for the anniversary observance in Wittenberg were NALC Bishop John Bradosky;



NALC leaders pose inside the Luther House in Wittenberg, Germany, the former Augustinian Monastery that became the home of Martin Luther and a significant site of the Reformation. Pictured are, from left, Pastor David Wendel, Bishop John Bradosky, Prof. James Nestingen, and Pastor Mark Chavez.

Pastor Mark Chavez, General Secretary; Pastor David Wendel, Assistant to the Bishop for Ministry and Ecumenism; and the Rev. Dr. James Nestingen, a retired professor and Luther scholar.

These four were the NALC participants in the ecumenical and inter-Lutheran consultation with the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS) and the Lutheran Church—Canada (LCC).

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The three church bodies have been meeting since 2011. The consultation meets twice a year for ongoing conversation and cooperation when appropriate. Two documents have been prepared by the consultation thus far: *An Affirmation of Marriage*, (May 2013, together with the Anglican Church in North America) and an essay on Holy Scripture, *God's Word Forever Shall Abide* (released in 2016). Both may be found on the NALC website at www.thenalc.org/nalc-statements.

The fall 2017 meeting of the consultation was scheduled in conjunction with the 500th anniversary of the Reformation to allow participants to have two days of meetings just prior to the Oct. 31 Reformation Day events. The consultation was hosted by the International Lutheran Council, the Independent Lutheran Church in Germany (SELK) and the LCMS at the International Lutheran Center at the Old Latin School, which was renovated and dedicated in 2015.

Reformation anniversary events at the Old Latin School included a noonday service of prayer and preaching and a choral concert by the SELK Choral Ensemble. Events were scheduled throughout the day around Wittenberg and included a ceremony in the Castle Church with Prime Minister Angela Merkel speaking, a Renaissance festival, and tours through Luther's and Phillip Melancthon's homes, museums, and St. Mary's Church (the city church in Wittenberg).

"A significant aspect of the visit was the opportunity to meet and consult with the Rev. Dr. Hans-Jörg Voight, Bishop of the Independent Evangelical Lutheran Church in Germany," said Bishop Bradosky.

Bishop Voight joined the consultation meetings and co-hosted the events at the Old Latin School. Bishop Voight is also the chair of the International Lutheran Council.



Participants in the consultation between the NALC and the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod and Lutheran Church—Canada pose inside the Old Latin School in Wittenberg, Germany.

"The extended time we had for getting to know Bishop Voight was well worth the trip to Germany in and of itself, as SELK is an important community within biblical and confessional Lutheranism in the world today. We look forward to continuing and building upon the relationship which was begun during these days, and thank Bishop Voight for his hospitality and leadership," Bishop Bradosky said.

Representing the LCMS in these meetings were the Rev. Dr. Albert B. Collver III, Director of Church Relations-Assistant to the President; the Rev. Dr. Joel Lehenbauer, Executive Director of the Commission on Theology and Church Relations (CTCR) and Assistant to the LCMS President; the Rev. Larry Vogel, Associate Director of the CTCR, and the Rev. John T. Pless, Assistant Professor of Pastoral Ministry and Missions at Concordia Theological Seminary in Fort Wayne, Ind.

Also joining the group was the Rev. Dr. Michael Kumm, chair of the LCMS Board of Directors and chair of the International Lutheran Society of Wittenberg.

Topics of discussion at the consultation were the future of the Reformation in the world today; the

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NALC Life-to-Life Discipleship Initiative; the newly-released book, *The Necessary Distinction*; and the upcoming joint daily Bible reading guide, encouraging members of all three church bodies to join in reading through the Bible in three years, with weekly readings selected from Johann Michael Reu's book, *Luther and the Scriptures*. Also discussed were issues related to the challenge to biblical marriage and gender confusion in today's world.

"While there are significant differences among the NALC, LCMS and LCC, as a biblical, confessional Lutheran church body, we appreciate the opportunity to engage in these serious and mutually beneficial conversations. Although we are in complete agreement that we are not working toward altar and pulpit fellowship, we agree to acknowledge and respect our differences and come to these meetings without intending to be agenda-driven. We also agree there is great value in discussing and addressing issues of common concern when possible, such as the truth and authority of God's Word, the need for confessional integrity today, the value of all human life, and the need for a unified voice upholding biblical marriage, especially with regard to gender identity," Pastor Wendel said.

"We are all excited about the daily Bible reading guide we will be providing to all our members, as we share a concern about decline of familiarity with the Holy Scriptures in our churches. If our work together helps in some small way to increase our shared commitment to the Word of God in every congregation, home and life, our consultation will have accomplished something of value," Pastor Wendel said.

Joining the NALC delegation as visitors were Kristi Bradosky, Susan Riches-Wendel and Carolyn Nestingen. After meetings and the anniversary observance, the delegation traveled to important sites in the lives of Luther and his beloved wife, Katherina "Katie" Von Bora.

In addition to visiting Wittenberg sites, they visited the convent ruins in Nimbschen (where Katie was a nun before escaping to Wittenberg) and Torgau (where Katie lived the later years of her life under the protection and care of Elector John Frederick,



Posing with statue of Katherina Von Bora at the Luther House in Wittenberg, Germany, are, from left, Susan Riches-Wendel, Kristi Bradosky, and Carolyn Nestingen.

dying just steps from Hartenfels Castle, the prince-electors' castle). They also visited Katie's tomb in St. Mary's Church in Torgau.

Torgau also houses the only chapel designed with input from Martin Luther, making it the first truly "Lutheran" worship space.

Reflecting on the visit to Germany, Pastor Chavez said, "Having never visited Wittenberg, I was impressed by how short (about 5-foot-2) and seemingly ordinary Luther was in such a small and insignificant village in Saxony. And yet, he had such a tremendous impact on the history of the world. It was also surprising to see how large the Black Cloister was (Luther's home, given to him by Elector Frederick the Wise) and how Luther and Katie filled their home with foster children, students and others who were in need. Luther's home was a center of love, care and ministry — as they lived their faith day by day."

The NALC delegation returned home with the hope that Luther and Katie's example will continue to inspire and uplift us daily as we seek to minister in Jesus' name.

Senior Adult Ministry Conference

By Pastor Brad Hales

Intergenerational ministry, using your gifts to further the kingdom, and learning the basics of starting a senior ministry in the local church were just a few of the topics covered at the NALC's first Senior Adult Ministry Conference Oct. 17-18 at Reformation Lutheran Church in Culpeper, Va.

Participants learned the importance of ministering to and evangelizing older adults.

North America is aging at a rapid rate. Ten thousand people each day are turning 65 years of age, and this will continue for the next 30 years. By the year 2060, over 90 million people in the U.S. will be 60 or better. Many of our congregations are already experiencing the "age wave," as our pews are dotted by gray hair rather than the laughs and cries of children.

Some may see this as a negative. But for the church, this is a tremendous opportunity. As the aging population grows, how can the local congregation make disciples of older members and intentionally evangelize this growing segment of the population?

During the event, Pastor Brad Hales, leader of the NALC Senior Ministry Network, spoke about the five S's of Senior Adult Ministry: Spiritual, Study, Service, Social and Self.

Under **Spiritual**, the local congregation can help older adults grow in discipleship through Bible study, worship, and prayer.

Study may include having a "Lunch and Learning" program where community speakers can share about different aspects of government, business, social services and other issues that affect seniors. Even as we age, mature adults have a great capacity for learning.

In **Service**, the church can encourage older adults to use their gifts and give of their time to make the community better in a variety of ways, whether it's a party, an outing, card playing, or just having a meal.



NALC Senior Ministry Conference at Reformation Lutheran Church in Culpeper, Va.

Social activities help to bring mature adults together in socialization and building relationships. They combat loneliness and isolationism.

For **Self**, maybe the local congregation could provide exercise programs, counseling, information on Medicare, assisted living/nursing home care, and other pertinent facts that will help our seniors to live and thrive. A great thing that our parishes can do is to help older adults to "age in place" — to be able to stay in their homes by using church and community resources.

Gary Pecuch, a youth ministry consultant to the NALC, presented on intergenerational ministry. Using the concept of "Faith Webbing," he spoke about how older adults can be spiritual mentors to the children and youth in a congregation. He told story after story of how many young people have found "spiritual grandparents" in their churches.

Pastor Wendy Berthelsen, president of Call, Inc. shared the importance of mature adults identifying and using their gifts and talents for ministry. When seniors put these gifts into action, the mission of growing God's Kingdom will happen.

Our churches are aging at a rapid rate. We can either look at this as a hindrance or an opportunity. Hopefully, we will see aging as a "gift from God," and help mature adults to grow in their discipleship journeys, and evangelize those who do not yet know the living Jesus.

Bible reading marathon in Virginia

By Lynnette Esse

For the third year in a row, Pastor Dennis Di Mauro of Trinity Lutheran Church in Warrenton, Va., led the charge to read the entire Bible out loud in a week. In previous years members of his own church took part in the readings, but this year five other churches joined in the efforts.

"I used to participate in something similar with my kids when they were young at the Capitol in Washington, D.C.," Pastor Di Mauro said. "It was a very powerful experience!"

Beginning Monday, Sept. 18, members of Trinity Lutheran Church took ownership of the reading schedule at Eva Walker Park in Warrenton. While some members took turns reading, others stood by the street with large signs announcing the readings. They were excited to see numerous people pull over and join the fun.

Warrenton Baptist Church, Warrenton Bible Fellowship, Heritage Presbyterian Church, Mt. Zion Baptist Church, and Warrenton United Methodist Church each took a day, filling the time slots with their members and passersby.

They began each day at 8 a.m. and continued until about 7 p.m. when the park closed, reading the English Standard Version of the Bible. They



Robin Harper and Mattie Mae Wines



Pastor Dennis Di Mauro

completed reading the entire Bible on Monday, Sept. 25, at 10 p.m.

"The purpose was for the reader to hear God's voice through his Holy Word. Bible illiteracy is rampant, even within our churches. On Sunday mornings, we tend to read 'the story within the story.' When you read the whole unedited version something miraculous happens," Pastor Di Mauro said.

For Methodist Robin Harper, the experience was deeply personal. "I did it to honor my brother, Rick Wines, who passed away in May. His Bible was the most important book in his life. It was falling apart, but he still read it every day. Whether I was taking a turn reading, or just listening to someone else read, it was a healing experience for me," she said.

Her mother, Mattie Mae Wines, is already looking forward to participating again next year. "It meant a lot to me because it brought back verses that I remembered from long ago. I really enjoyed the experience of both reading and listening to the pastors read," she said.

Temples and Priests

Before and after Christ's resurrection

This is the fourth in a series of articles on temples, priests and church buildings by Pastor Mark Chavez, NALC General Secretary.

We concluded last month observing that our bodies are moving temples of the Holy Spirit bearing the presence of the living God to everyone we encounter. We are living stones built upon the cornerstone, Christ our Lord, and together we form the primary temple structure after his resurrection. This month we will look at the secondary structures, our church buildings.

Our church buildings are gathering places for the primary structures — our Lord and the members of his body. We take good care of our church buildings because we regard them as sacred spaces. Altar guilds carefully prepare the altar, pulpit, font and chancel for our encounter with the living God in worship. God's Word is read and proclaimed there, and we come to the Lord's Table to be fed his body and blood. We receive forgiveness of all our sin and at the baptismal font we are put to death with Christ as sinners, and raised to be saints as a new creation in Christ.

However, worship is not the only encounter with the living God in a church building. It happens every other time and day of the week when we gather in our churches as the Holy Spirit's mobile, living temples. Whether it's a Bible study, a Sunday school class, a committee meeting or operating a food bank for the community, people have the opportunity to be in the presence of God to hear his Word and be loved by him through the members of Christ's body.

With this in mind, it's worth asking, do we maintain the other parts of the church buildings as well as we do the sanctuary? Do we prepare for the events in the other parts of the building with the same level of care as we prepare for worship? If not, why not? Have we lost sight of the radical new nature of temples and priests after the resurrection?

Maintaining our church buildings as well as we are able is important, but we should always remember they are secondary structures, not primary. They are meant to serve the primary temple, Jesus, and the individual temples that are the members of his body. Sometimes in our zeal to maintain and preserve our church buildings, we end up serving the buildings. We spend so much time, energy and resources on the secondary structures that we lose sight of tending to the care and training of the primary ones — the mobile temples.

We can also lose sight of our Lord's intended overall movement for us as his mobile temples. We tend to focus on the movement *into* church buildings, neglecting the movement *out* of them. Jesus gathered 12 disciples to himself, but it was for the purpose of sending them out to the ends of the earth to make disciples. So too the Holy Spirit gathers us into our church buildings, but for the purpose of sending us out of our churches to make disciples of all nations.

We glorify God by moving into our church buildings and worshiping him, but we also glorify God in our movement out of our churches and into the world. In the Sermon on the Mount our Lord says to us:

You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven. (Matthew 5:14-16)

If most of our time and energy is focused on the movement into our churches, and little is focused on preparing us to move out of our buildings, then neither we nor our church buildings are serving the Church's primary mission to make disciples of all nations.

Next time we will consider caring for the primary, mobile temples of the Holy Spirit.

LAMP – Lutheran Association of Missionaries and Pilots

By Danielle Frederickson

Many of you probably have heard of LAMP. After all, we've been around almost 50 years. But do you know what our ministry is about?

The Lutheran Association of Missionaries and Pilots (LAMP) exists to reach out to children and communities in northern Canada. Being so isolated, many of these communities do not have churches, must less regular Christian leadership or education. Our volunteers and staff work to change that.

We truly believe that every child deserves the chance to hear about Christ's love and forgiveness. That is why we hold Vacation Bible Schools for children during the summer and promote year-round contact between volunteers and northern community members.

You may also have heard the phrase "to educate and delight." The indigenous children we teach are filled with energy. Also, they are not used to sitting in church. So, we reach out to them with crafts, games, music, skits, puppet shows, and whatever else can reinforce the Bible lessons we explore each day of a week-long VBS. It's demanding work, but our volunteers are dedicated to telling the kids that they have been created by God, are loved by Him, and can accept his gift of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ.

From my experience in northern Manitoba, the best times are the quiet times. When a child gives you a hug it is a precious sign of trust. When a little one asks, "Why would Jesus die for me?" you know that you are making an impact. When children come back to see you in the evening, after class is done



for the day, you know that you are a source of joy to them. These children want your attention, they want to feel loved, and they need to know about God's love, which is ever so much more important. That is what LAMP is about.



Youth and Family Ministry Update

Monthly webinars are offered on the second Tuesday of each month at 2 p.m. ET. The webinars are archived at faithwebbing.com.

Registration for two events is now open:

The Nexus Institute for your deeper thinking high school students. Visit www.thenexusinstitute.org.

Quake Events. Visit <http://quakeevent.com>.

2018 NALC Pastors Conference

Discipleship, Leadership and the NALC Pastor

Again and again, we hear that one of the greatest blessings in the North American Lutheran Church is the annual Pastors Conference.

Each year has seen a significant increase in participation, but attendance is still at less than half of the number of certified pastors in the NALC.

Certainly, scheduling conflicts and other issues keep some pastors from attending. However, many do not attend because congregations and congregational leaders are not supportive and willing to provide time and finances so that their pastor will participate.

We hope, increasingly, NALC congregations will realize the great benefits that will come, not only to their pastor, but also to their congregation when he or she attends the annual pastors conference. This couldn't be more so than this year when the theme is, "Discipleship, Leadership and the NALC Pastor."

It has become clear that two aspects of pastoral ministry neglected in the last 20-30 years are discipleship/disciple-making and leadership.

Although we acknowledged our Lord's Great Commission (Matthew 28) to go and make disciples, there was no intentionality about it in congregations because, even as pastors, we were not prepared for disciple-making in seminary, contextual education or pastoral formation.

At the same time, seminarians were taught to be professional pastors and "care-givers," so to speak, but were rarely formed to be pastoral leaders who were mature in the faith (Ephesians 4:13), ready to effectively serve as part of a congregational leadership team.

Many realize we have re-teaching and re-forming to do, with regard to NALC pastors, resulting in the theme of this year's conference.



Ministry Matters

Pastor David Wendel

Assistant to the Bishop
for Ministry and Ecumenism

At the conference being held Jan. 30-Feb. 1 at the Drury Plaza Hotel San Antonio River Walk in San Antonio, Texas, Bishop John Bradosky will offer two keynote presentations on discipleship and leadership, addressing topics ranging from practical pastoral advice to the need for improved preaching in our congregations. Dr. Jim Nestingen again will offer two sessions on "Preaching in Lent, Holy Week and Easter" and there will be workshops dealing with practical aspects of pastoral ministry, discipleship and leadership.

There will also be a meeting of the ministerium at which the Bishop and pastors will discuss ongoing work being done by the NALC Structure Task Force, the Church and Ministry Task Force, the NALC Life-to-Life Discipleship initiative and other important concerns. A highlight of the conference is always a service of Holy Communion with Bishop Bradosky preaching and presiding, with the renewal of ordination vows and time for intentional, personal prayer for each pastor.

Newly added this year is the opportunity for pastors interested in learning more about what it means to be "coached" in the NALC, to participate in a pre-conference seminar 7-9 p.m. on Monday, Jan. 29.

Discipleship coaching in the NALC is a way for a pastor to engage in three years of regular mentoring by a trained coach, who will assist the pastor in personal and professional reflection, assessment, goal-setting and accountability. The

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Advent devotions by Pastor Wendel

Waiting for the Lord: An Advent Walk Through the Psalms, an Advent devotional booklet for 2017, is now available on the NALC website.

The devotions, prepared by Pastor David Wendel, Assistant to the Bishop for Ministry and Ecumenism, are based on the recommended psalms for daily prayer during Advent from the *Lutheran Book of Worship*.

The devotional booklet is free and may be printed and copied for use in the home, by families, in congregations, Bible study groups, etc.

The devotions can also be accessed in the free *NALC Walk of Faith* app available for mobile devices in the App Store and on Google Play.

You also may sign up to receive the Advent devotional material as a daily text or email message. To receive a daily Advent devotional text message, text @nalcadvent to 614-682-8693. To receive a daily Advent devotional email message, go to remind.com/join/nalcadvent and enter your name and email address where indicated.

Daily devotions by NALC pastors are available on the NALC website, on the NALC Network, and on Facebook each day of the year. The devotions from Pastor Wendel will be featured during Advent and are the same as those in the booklet.

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evening seminar will be at no additional cost to pastors attending the conference.

In addition, those participating in the coaching seminar who sign up to begin coaching will receive a scholarship to cover the cost of the first three months. Those who wish to participate in the coaching seminar should register by contacting Maddie Benson in the NALC Ohio office at mbenson@thenalc.org or 614-777-5709 by Jan. 15.

If you are a member of an NALC congregation, a church council member, or other congregational leader, please take the initiative and encourage your pastor to attend the 2018 NALC Pastors Conference. Make sure that the council approves the pastor's participation, allocating funds for travel, hotel and registration. Clarify that the pastor is not using vacation time for this conference, as it is an expectation that all NALC clergy participate as part of their responsibility to the congregation and the church as a whole. Expect that the pastor will report to the congregational leadership upon return, indicating how the conference has benefitted the pastor and will benefit his or her leadership within the congregation.

The more our NALC pastors are maturing in faith, being formed as disciples and disciple-makers, increasing their skills as preachers of the Word of God and becoming more effective members of the congregational leadership team, the stronger will be congregations of the NALC — and the North American Lutheran Church as a biblical, confessional church body.

Please support and ensure your pastor's participation in the annual NALC Pastors Conference! It will be a blessing to your pastor and your congregation!

ACNA – NALC affirmations

The ecumenical consultation between the Anglican Church in North America and the North American Lutheran Church has developed four pastoral and educational affirmations for study by congregations.

The four affirmations address Holy Baptism, Holy Communion, Holy Scripture, and Jesus Christ, the Gospel and Justification. Accompanying study guides have been designed to involve lay people of all ages in learning, reflection and conversation.

It is hoped that these materials will be used for study, reflection and discussion in congregations, families, small groups or other activities within and between congregations of the ACNA and NALC.

The four affirmations study documents are available on the NALC website.

Faithkeepers: Be Your Brothers' Keeper

Faithkeepers: Be Your Brothers' Keeper is a film produced by Roma Downey in concert with the Clarion Project, a non-profit organization whose stated goal is to “educate the public about the dangers of radical Islam.”

Since 2014, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) has wreaked horrors upon Christians, Jews, and even some fellow Muslims throughout the Middle East. Crucifixions, beheadings, and torture have been their weapons of persecution and attempted genocide. Ancient churches have been desecrated and destroyed.

The Christians of Iraq have found themselves to be in a particularly horrific situation. Since they have fled their home cities (like Mosul and Raqqa) but not their country, the United Nations does not consider them to be refugees and therefore has not provided any kind of aid or assistance for them.

You may be aware that much of ISIS has already been defeated and driven out of most of the areas they had previously occupied. Iraqi Christians are now returning to their hometowns, but their homes,

their churches, their marketplaces, and much of the infrastructure have been decimated. They continue to need much support.

Faithkeepers: Be Your Brothers' Keeper, brings the voices of the Iraqi Christians into our midst. Their heart-felt stories are a demonstration of the human spirit and the Holy Spirit working in tandem. It is our great hope that those who view this film will be inspired as well to pray for and support these, our Christian brothers and sisters.

NALC leaders have viewed this film and consider it so worthy that they have made arrangements for every NALC congregation to view it without cost. NALC congregations received an email with screening information.

More information on the film is available online at faithkeepers.clarionproject.org.

If you have any further questions or would like further suggestions on how to provide support for Iraqi Christians, please contact Pastor Mark A. Hoffman at mahoffmansts@stpaulsmillersburg.com.



*For the LORD is good;
his mercy is everlasting;
and his faithfulness endures
from age to age.
— Psalm 100:4 (LBW/BCP)*

Please join in thanks and praise to God for this academic year at the North American Lutheran Seminary. As you hold our students, faculty and staff in prayer, know that we are holding you in prayer as well, ever thankful for your love, your kindness, and your constant support.



Moving Forward Faithfully — Reclaiming the Transcendent Truth and Authority of God's Word

This article by NALC Bishop John F. Bradosky was published in "Word & World: Theology for Christian Ministry" in the Fall 2017 issue (Vol. 37, No. 4, pages 348-359) on "The Continuing Reformation." It is reprinted by permission of Word & World. The entire issue is available online at wordandworld.luthersem.edu.

As we look back on and celebrate the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, today is a perfect opportunity to reflect on our current context as well as the opportunities to shape our future with the gifts of our rich confessional heritage.

One of the issues that provided impetus for the Reformation was the nature of the authority of Scripture in directing the life of the church, both corporately and individually. Luther's position was clear and concise. It is Scripture alone that is the "*Norma Normanza*" for all matters of life and faith. Luther wrote that the Bible "alone is to be trusted because it is through itself most certain, most easily accessible, comprehensible, interpreting itself, proving, judging all the words of all. All leaders must subordinate themselves to its witness¹ The Pope, Luther, Augustine, Paul, an angel from heaven — these should not be masters, judges, arbiters but only witnesses, disciples and confessors of Scripture."²

After 500 years, the issue of authority, truth, relevance and the use of Scripture is not only a matter of great contention but a source of division in both the culture and the church, pointing to the need for a reformation and renewal as powerful and substantive as the first.

¹ D. Martin Luthers Werke (Weimar: Böhlau, 1883–1993) 7:96.

² Luther, *Lectures on Galatians, Chapters 1–4* (1535), in *Luther's Works*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan, Helmut Lehmann, and Christopher Boyd Brown, 75 vols. (Philadelphia and St. Louis: Fortress and Concordia, 1963) 26:58.

The modern world is in a paradoxical rebellion against authority, while desperately seeking some norm or norms to guide our common life. Bishop Bradosky urges that Christians reclaim the centrality of the biblical witness as a life-giving authority, whose Word is vital to all peoples.

While we live in a culture that seems to be in a state of rebellion against all forms of authority, we are simultaneously desperately searching for a set of values to norm and guide our life together. A culture, like an individual, will always struggle to survive. A culture is, by definition, a group of people who share a common set of values. Without sharing a common set of values, a culture will disintegrate. Inclusivity, acceptance, tolerance, and multiculturalism are not values sufficient to provide for the cohesiveness of culture and therefore will also accelerate its demise. The acceptance of every value is synonymous with having no values around which a strong culture can develop. The struggle within a culture becomes desperate when there is no longer a common set of values that defines and norms it. Perhaps our seeming denial or rebellion against any authority is really a cry for some authority and set of values that is not destructive but is, rather, life-giving.

We have turned to our own wisdom and insight, struggling to find such hope-filled authority. However, all too frequently we experience the failure of these varied sources of authority, resulting in increasing levels of suspicion, skepticism, and fear.

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We have looked to technology as a source of authority at our fingertips that we can own, use, and control. Computers and the Internet give us access to more information than we can process. The Internet has been used as a means of connecting us, creating community, and producing hope for artificial intelligence, which may or may not be an improvement over human intelligence. Hoping for authoritative information, these same resources have been used to manipulate us, deceive us, divide us, spy on us, and undermine our security.

We have pursued science as a source of ultimate authority. What was once a system of theories constantly being tested and changed based on new evidence has become a source of dogma that must be believed by scientists in order to be included in the scientific community. If not devoted to rescuing earth from imminent destruction, science would encourage us to believe that the answers to our struggles here may lie in the far reaches of our galaxy.

The academic community is another source of authority in which we have placed our trust. We turn to people with degrees in a variety of subjects, as if the degree imparts true wisdom regarding the application of truth to life. Some assert that, because they have degrees, they are experts and others must follow their direction, even on matters they have never studied.

In our attempts to live longer — even if we are not living any better — we have placed ourselves under the authority of health care providers who encourage us with testing, replacement parts, transplants, surgeries for healing and cosmetic improvements, therapies, drugs, diets, and countless solutions for preventing illness and maintaining fitness. In spite of their best efforts and rising costs, every solution is temporary at best.

Others turn to political authority vested in party platforms and agendas as their source of hope, believing that political solutions can and must address every problem. The struggles for political power and control seem to produce more broken promises for the many and benefits for the few who can afford to purchase influence among decision makers. We know firsthand that political solutions

do not necessarily provide for unity but rather can become the foundation for greater division through values that are diametrically opposed.

Underneath each of these alternative sources is the unceasing pursuit of the power and authority of self. Self-fulfillment, self-actualization, self-realization are never far from pure selfishness and narcissism, basing meaning on personal experience, sexual identity on feelings, and exploiting relationships for personal gratification. Not far behind in such selfishness is the accumulation of wealth — money and possessions as a means of establishing authority by asserting power and control over others.

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Dallas Willard asserts that not only is our problem the pursuit of these sources of power and authority but the speed at which we pursue them and the lack of time spent in evaluating the results of placing our trust in them. His book, *The Divine Conspiracy: Rediscovering Our Hidden Life in God*, begins with the story of a pilot. He writes: “Recently, a pilot was practicing high-speed maneuvers in a jet fighter. She turned the controls for what she thought was a steep ascent — and flew straight into the ground. She was unaware that she had been flying upside down. ... This is a parable of human existence in our times ... most of us as individuals, society as a whole, live at high-speed, and often with no clue to whether we are flying upside down or right-side up. Indeed, we are haunted by a strong suspicion that there may be no difference — or at least that it is unknown or irrelevant.”³

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³ Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy: Rediscovering Our Hidden Life in God* (New York: HarperCollins, 1998) 1–2.

What the pilot experienced in her disorientation has everything to do with the speed of the aircraft. Some dismiss Willard's illustration as improbable because they have been upside down and have experienced the sensation of blood rushing to their head, as well as the resulting pressure. You should be able to tell if you are upside down. However, what they fail to consider is the effect of speed. When speed is producing a gravitational force greater than the normal gravitational pull, you no longer have the sensation of being upside down. Because of the speed, the blood is being pushed to the back of your head as you move forward. Without reference to other clues regarding your orientation, you could be easily convinced that pulling back on the controls would cause you to climb, when in fact it brings about your demise. When the church tries to keep up with cultural trends so that it is moving at the same speed as the culture, it may become just as disoriented and be unaware that it may also be flying upside down. Thinking that the next maneuver will cause it to soar, it crashes and burns.

There is good evidence to suggest that this is descriptive of the state of the church today. Mainline churches, including the Lutheran expression of the church, are in a state of decline. Some are in a more rapid decline than others, but when compared to population growth, we are in far worse shape than most are willing to admit. Many are still living in a state of denial and refusing to acknowledge this current reality. Still fewer have studied the reasons for such a decline. Into this vacuum, I offer the following observations:

1. Some believed the church needed to change its focus and direction in order to achieve relevancy. The faulty assumption was that the gospel of Jesus Christ depends on us to make it relevant to the secular culture. The mission of the church was diverted from the Great Commission or the Great Commandment to the agendas of the culture. By promoting the agenda of the culture, some believed the culture would then be more open to the mission of the church. However, as the church abandoned its mission in favor of speaking out for the culture, there was no need for the culture to respond to the church, because the church now adopted the cultural values as its own. The church became

mired in the political as a means to attain popularity. Political agendas and activism became the means for demonstrating relevancy. But the result was a church that became less popular and increasingly irrelevant to the culture.

2. One of the specific cultural values that undermined the authority, mission, and ministry of the church is the preoccupation with the cultural dogma of the continuous progress of humanity towards positive change, sophistication, and therefore superiority over our predecessors. This social dogma asserts that the present is far more valuable than the past and that the values, ideas, lifestyle, philosophies, and lack of religious faith in the present are far superior to the past. The hermeneutic of the present is skepticism for anything in the past. This hermeneutic adopted by the church is devastating to Christian faith passed on from countless generations that preceded us. By denouncing the authority of the past, we posit the relevancy of the current culture and its various platforms of authority, often without serious critique. However, it is only a hermeneutic of faith that produces believers.

3. The sense of the transcendent gave way to the systems of salvation we could manufacture for ourselves. Science, technology, medicine, and politics led the way. Rather than discuss the nature of the kingdom of God, the church was content to settle for political parties and platform agendas. Others have usurped the responsibility once held by the church of establishing values and the moral framework that provides stability for the culture. Still others have taken over responsibilities that were once essential ministries of the church: caring for the poor and hungry, the widows and orphans, the sick and dying.

4. Internally, the church adapted by abandoning the authority of Scripture. In order to validate the values of the culture it also had to abandon the historic interpretation of the Scripture. Seminary professors, in the name of "historical-critical method," were free to engage in deconstructive methods of interpretation, revisionist methods, and reductionist methods or Gospel minimalism. (Time and space will not permit me to provide you with examples of each, but they are abundant.) Given the relativistic

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understanding of truth in our culture — and resulting church cultures that embrace a methodology in which one is bound to an internal (self-absorbed) conscience, there is a belief that “bound conscience” allows for biblical interpretation in a virtual “free-for-all” in which every believer should be able to interpret the Scriptures in any way that fits their worldview and personal needs. This is not a Lutheran understanding; we have a methodology for the faithful interpretation of Scripture that is rooted in our Reformation heritage.

5. What has preoccupied us for decades is teaching the content of issues and agendas rather than the faith. It is no small concern that our people know more about environmental issues than they do the life of Jesus. We know more about political issues than our confessions. We know more about the economy than we do about ecclesiology. We know about social ills but very little about the spiritual ills that plague us. We are aware of world hunger but care little about helping others hunger for God. We are aware of our need to conserve water resources but fail to lead others to the wellspring of the water of life. We talk about freedom but say little about obedience. We focus on grace but don’t see the value of repentance and transformation.

6. The over-institutionalization of our churches has worked to hasten our decline. I read these words recently: “The Church was at first an intimate fellowship with Jesus. In Greece, it became a philosophy and a theology. In Italy, it became an institution. In Europe, it became a culture. In the United States, it became just another non-profit corporation.” We have adopted a corporate model requiring the upward flow of power, money, and control to the uppermost levels of church structures, and have become dependent on those at the top to address the problems and concerns, to produce the changes necessary for renewal and reform. What the over-institutionalization of the church succeeded in doing is to suck the life out of the local congregation. The front line for mission and ministry became those stuck in bureaucratic offices, who have the least contact with those in need. They are the least effective in delivering what is helpful, but use every contact to promote the values of their internal culture and insist on conformity with their



agendas. As they continued to fail, decreasing in size and financial assets, they resorted to what every dying institution does.

7. Institutional survival has now become the mission. Preserving their existence becomes the most important goal, even if it means compromising the gospel. Evangelicals are no exception to the problems of over-institutionalization. As they overbuilt their infrastructure they were forced to fill the seats and make their message popular in order to afford that excessive infrastructure. The easiest way to popularity is to compromise the gospel or redefine it for the sake of a more popular message

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that is sure to please. The characteristics of institutional survival are defensiveness, deceit, attacks, creating new enemies to blame for failure, and protection strategies. Denial of the truth and maintaining images become all-important. Loyalty to the institution becomes the ultimate value. The churches in our culture did not reach the current state of decline instantaneously. It occurred a little at a time. George Barna describes this concept of social change as gradualism. As a pilot, the understanding and use of the compass is an appropriate analogy for understanding the effects of gradualism and our context. If you are following a course and have deviated from your compass heading by a few degrees but are only flying five miles, you will be assured of finding your destination airport for a safe landing. If you are off a few degrees and you are going 500 miles you could miss an entire city. If you are off a few degrees and you are going 5,000 miles you could miss an entire state or two. The longer you go, the greater the delta or change. This methodology for change is imperceptible but intentional. Those advocating such change seem to have a consistent set of mantras, "Why are you worried about the little things? It is only a few insignificant degrees of change. It won't affect you." By the time we realize how far off course we are, we are lost and desperate for direction-finding assistance.

Fortunately, the realization of the need for reform and renewal is growing. Some long to speak up and move forward, refusing to accept the spiraling decline as the status quo. Because of our history and heritage, I believe that Lutherans are in the best position to lead such a movement. Our confessional heritage is conducive to providing the foundation and theological structure for these efforts. That pathway forward must include the following essentials:

1. Asserting the authority and norm of the Word of God in Holy Scripture.
2. Acknowledging the historical interpretations of Scripture as an essential part of our legacy.
3. Affirming that Jesus Christ is the only source of salvation, that he alone is the Way, the Truth and the Life. He is the incarnate Word, the fullness of

the Scripture and yet defined by his own Word. The Scripture is his sanctuary.

4. Advancing the mission of the Church as Christ instituted it in the Great Commission (Matt 28).
5. Advocating for renewed commitment to catechesis — teaching the faith; vocation — living the faith; and an ecclesiology based on mutual accountability and responsibility—the application of our Confessional heritage that forms and shapes our identity, making us a blessing to the entire church.
6. Abandoning all vestiges of the over-institutionalization of the church in favor of the primacy of the local congregation as the front line for mission and ministry.
7. Aspiring to return to the primary focus of the church — discipleship — and creating a culture that values making disciples through equipping and empowering the laity.

This reform and renewal will require the same level of sacrificial commitment as the Reformation or the Confessing Church Movement led by Dietrich Bonhoeffer in opposition to the German Church. The German Church had been conscripted by the culture and succumbed to political pressure of leaders like Hitler and others. Under such pressure, it was willing to compromise the truth for the sake of its own survival. Bonhoeffer decried the cheap grace the Lutheran Church of Germany was offering people. In place of such cheap grace he reminded them of the costly grace of Jesus Christ and the risky demands of discipleship. "When Christ calls someone, He bids them to come and die."

If Bonhoeffer were alive today he might well be reminding us that the cross of Christ, his sacrificial love for the salvation of the world, must be manifest in our own lives. It is at the cross that sin is forgiven, salvation is received, and new life begins. The cross is not the sign that all is lost but that everything is gained. The only way we can truly experience life is to die in Christ. In such a death, we live. The cost of reforming and renewing the culture of the church exacts a huge toll on those

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committed to such a cause. To this cause, without regard to the price, we must commit ourselves. Through the power of the Holy Spirit we boldly confess Christ, even in the hostile environment of the institutional church, American culture, or any other oppositional forces in the world committed to eliminating or subjugating all those who believe in Jesus Christ. We keep the cross in front of us, acknowledging what is sure to come. It is the saints who came before us who willingly offered their lives for the sake of the gospel. They have passed on the gospel of Jesus Christ in its purity to us, and it is that same gospel that we proclaim. The witness of those saints encourages us to live today with the same hope and promise that sustained them.

What sustained them is the assurance in the promises of Scripture. Luther understood the Scriptures as the ultimate authority for faith and for life. It is from the Scriptures that the church obtains its authority, as the Scriptures bring the church into existence and sustain it. Luther's sense of the holiness and transcendent nature of Scripture is as profound as his love for it.

In his lectures on the Psalms Luther writes,

What pasture is to the beast, the nest for the birds, the stream for fish, the Scriptures are for believing souls. To the arrogant, of course, they are a stumbling block; he will have nothing to do with them, since they offer him nothing. But to him who approaches the Scriptures with humility they open themselves and themselves produce humility, change man from a desperate sinner into a child of God. They give everything which the soul needs, and it is to tempt God, if anyone will not be satisfied with the Scriptures. They are the fountain from which one must dip. Each word of the same is a source which affords an inexhaustible abundance of water to everyone who thirsts after the saving doctrine. God's will is completely contained therein, so that we must constantly go back to them. Nothing should be presented which is not confirmed by the authority of both Testaments and agrees with them. It cannot be otherwise, for the Scriptures are divine; in them God speaks and they are His Word.

It is the saints who came before us who willingly offered their lives for the sake of the gospel. They have passed on the gospel of Jesus Christ in its purity to us, and it is that same gospel that we proclaim.

In his lectures on the Psalms Luther regards the expressions "God speaks," and "the Scriptures speak," as convertible. To hear or to read the Scriptures is nothing else than to hear God. They are his sanctuary in which he is present. Therefore we dare not despise one single word of the Scripture for "all its words are weighed, counted and measured."⁴

Luther believed that the Scripture is the Word of God. It is purely transcendent, proceeding from the Holy Spirit with the cooperation of people who wrote according to the inspiration of the same Spirit. Further, Luther believed the Scripture was both inerrant and infallible. He wrote in Councils and the Church, "I have learned to hold the Scripture alone inerrant."⁵ Men may err and be deceived but God's Word cannot err. In his commentary on 1 Timothy, Luther wrote, "We have the actual Word of God. It is a great thing to know that one has the very sure and infallible Word of God."⁶ The Word of God will never fail you. "The Word of God is the very wisdom of God and absolutely infallible truth."⁷ This Word is powerful enough to effect the salvation it announces and to impart the life it promises. This Word is the manger that holds the Christ as its content points to him as our Lord and Savior. Through the Spirit and the Word, God lets himself and his will be known and grasped. "Thus the Holy Spirit makes you His pupil and impresses on your heart what reason is unable to do, namely faith and

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⁴ M. Reu, *Luther and the Scriptures* (Columbus, OH: Wartburg Press, 1944) 17–18.

⁵ *Luther's Works* 41:25.

⁶ *Luther's Works* 28:239.

⁷ *Luther's Works* 1:122.

trust in these words.”⁸ This Word is our most essential treasure. “The Word is a treasure, but not like the treasure of men.”⁹ This treasure is not only to be on our hearts but in our ears and on our lips. “It is surely necessary for Him to be with you, not only to have His words resound in your ears but also to strengthen your hearts with his light and fire.”¹⁰ “The Word is near you, on your lips and in your heart (that is, the Word of faith which we preach).”¹¹ I believe Luther’s understanding of the Word was comprehensive in scope. It is through the Word that we come to Christ, the kingdom of God comes to us, faith is given, we are called and converted, our sins are forgiven, our conscience is consoled, our hearts are comforted, we become the saints of Christ and we properly worship in Word and Sacrament.

Luther’s high view and authoritative understanding of the Scripture was matched by the careful way he engaged in the process of interpretation. He believed there were at least five important principles in that process.

1. The literal sense of Scripture is identical with its historical content. There is no going behind the text in order to discover a different event than the event reported. Begin with the words in the text and let them speak.
2. Discern both law and gospel in the text. Does it point to our sin and our need for grace, or does it provide the clear remedy through the gospel of Jesus.
3. The Scriptures always point us to Jesus.
4. The Scriptures interpret themselves. Read the entire Word of God in order to understand and interpret the individual parts.
5. The Bible has a universal and immediate sense,

⁸ *Luther’s Works* 23:170.

⁹ *Luther’s Works* 28:239.

¹⁰ *Luther’s Works* 24:290.

¹¹ *Luther’s Works* 9:279.

granted by the Holy Spirit and recognized by the eyes of faith, that transcends historical conditions and events, and must be interpreted in the public reading and study by faithful people.

Many applauded Luther’s efforts in moving the Bible from the cathedral to the kitchen table of every believer’s home. Today it must be reassembled in its totality from the trash heaps of those who have engaged in minimalism, deconstruction, and revisionist techniques for minimizing its normative influence.

This understanding of the authoritative and transcendent nature of the Scripture as the norm for all matters of life and faith must again be asserted as the foundation for reform and renewal in the church today. This authority must be understood to transcend all other competing authoritative sources in our culture. In reflecting on the first reformation, many applauded Luther’s efforts in moving the Bible from the cathedral to the kitchen table of every believer’s home. Today it must be reassembled in its totality from the trash heaps of those who have engaged in minimalism, deconstruction, and revisionist techniques for minimizing its normative influence. It must be pulled away from those who deny its truth and power while asserting contemporary human wisdom as more authoritative and relevant to our needs. This transcendent truth must find its way back into the daily devotional life of every Christian — a guide to every relationship, the foundation of the faith we believe, and the inspiration to engage in Christ’s mission that provides direction and purpose for living.

While clergy play an important role in providing the clear proclamation of the Scripture as they engage in Word and Sacrament ministry and in catechesis — faithfully teaching the truth contained in the Scripture — the power of this new or continuing reformation will be the role of the laity, what I believe was Luther’s original intention. This focus is

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the nature of discipleship, which is just beginning to impact our life together. Our understanding of Word and Sacrament propels us into discipleship, a life of following Jesus. What we receive in worship we carry with us into the world. In baptism, we receive Christ and his kingdom. We take on a new identity as a child of God, a citizen of the kingdom Jesus came to proclaim. To our own name is added the name "Christian." We become little Christs. Parents, along with the Christian community, take on the responsibility of discipling the child to become a follower of Jesus, maturing in the faith until they, too, are able to share their faith in Jesus with others and disciple them. Unfortunately, we have often abandoned those children and families after the sacramental act is concluded. We have failed to ask the far deeper Lutheran question, "What does this mean?" What are the implications for parents and sponsors? How have we trained discipleship coaches to walk with parents and children in an intentional process toward becoming a mature follower of Jesus Christ?

Asking those questions would insure that we understand the implications of baptism, leading us to a mature understanding of the priesthood of all believers, as well as a more complete understanding of Christian vocation. Such an understanding of baptism would include time for daily confession, forgiveness and repentance, making good use of the promises received in baptism. Private confession with another brother or sister in Christ would not seem foreign to our life but a treasure that unbinds and frees us.

The understanding of discipleship moves us from the Word read and proclaimed at worship into a life of daily reading, reflection, study, and meditation on the Word, providing time for Christ to speak through his Word as he is present in it. This discipline is more than a personal and privatized endeavor. Disciples must come together to reflect on Scripture, sharing insight and meaning, offering encouragement and care through the mutual consolation in the Word.

The primacy of prayer in our worship compels us to lead a life of daily prayer. Luther encourages us to pray prior to our reading and reflection on the Scripture so that Christ will be our teacher through

the Holy Spirit, who comes to us in our prayers. Failure to begin with prayer means that we will be our own teachers and miss what Christ would have us learn. This life of prayer draws us ever closer to Christ and is a powerful resource in guiding and directing our decisions. Intercession for others is equally important as an expression of our love and care for them.

Even the offering should not only remind us of Christ's sacrificial love during worship but inspire us to invest our lives in the lives of others. That is the commitment of discipleship, to invest our life in the life of another. While we gather as a community, the love of Christ we receive is to be invested in the life of all those with whom we share a relationship.

The Creed should remind us to grow in our understanding of the faith we possess. Teaching the faith is a primary component in equipping the laity as disciples of Jesus. Christian education must begin at the earliest possible moment and never end. We must teach and be open in our learning to fully embrace Jesus, not according to our own preconceived understanding but according to his revealed identity in the Word. He is who he claims to be: the Lord of Life; the Savior of the world; the Messiah; the Way, the Truth and the Life. Teaching the faith transforms our worldview from our secular culture to a biblical worldview of the kingdom of heaven Jesus came to proclaim. Only in this worldview do we glimpse how the world looks from God's perspective. Confessing the Creed together reminds us that our learning equips disciples to confess their faith in Christ Jesus, to bear witness to Christ. Christian education not only helps us mature in our faith but also equips us to pass on what we have learned in every relationship. The challenge in Christian education is not the mere accumulation of information as though we are designed to be a reservoir of information. Rather, we are to intentionally pass on what we are learning immediately, as we learn it, as though we are a pipeline through whom God's Word enters the lives of others. Learning to share the content is as important as the content itself.

The Eucharist does not end in consuming the bread and the wine. The presence of Christ we have received in the sacrament creates a longing to

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share Christ's presence through caring for and demonstrating Christian community to others, both within and beyond the body of Christ. We see the nature of that Christian community described in Acts 2:42–47. "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and prayer. Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved." These verses create a powerful glimpse into Christian community. Discipleship invites us to ask the question, what does this mean? Disciples are challenged to mature not only in their understanding but also in their application of the faith to daily living. The nature of this community is one that bears witness to the profound love of Jesus Christ. This community is incarnational, highly relational, and reflective of Christ's love that demands mutual responsibility and accountability. This is the nature of life-to-life discipleship that is our greatest resource for reform and renewal today.

This is only a partial list of the connections that one can easily make between our Lutheran identity in the centrality of worship and discipleship. I began with worship not only because of its centrality in our life together but also because its foundation is the Scripture from beginning to end. The Word of God alone is powerful enough to bring the reform and renewal the church needs. Probing the depth of the Word of God when we regard it as transcendent and authoritative truth opens us to its life-giving and transforming power. It transforms our values, understandings, and behaviors, equipping us to invest our life in Christ in the lives of others through catechesis, or teaching the faith, and vocation, or modeling and living the faith, in the context of a Christian community committed to love expressed in mutual responsibility and accountability. It is the Word of God in Holy Scripture that defines and describes this process as Jesus disciplined his first followers.

While the world debates absolute truth and relative truth, objective truth and subjective truth, ultimate truth and situational truth, universal truth and cultural truth, for the sake of its own renewal and for the sake of the world the church must boldly proclaim the transcendent truth of Sacred Scripture.

While the world debates absolute truth and relative truth, objective truth and subjective truth, ultimate truth and situational truth, universal truth and cultural truth, for the sake of its own renewal and for the sake of the world the church must boldly proclaim the transcendent truth of Sacred Scripture. We do so not simply to argue for it as one among many understandings of the truth, but in word and deed we regard it as the norm above all other norms for all matters of life and faith, believing it, confessing it, and living it. It is our only hope for "*semper reformanda*."

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NALC Contact Information

NALC Ministry Office

3500 Mill Run Drive
Hilliard, OH 43026-7770
888-551-7254
614-777-5709
bseifert@thenalc.org

NALC Administrative Office

2299 Palmer Drive, Suite 220
New Brighton, MN 55112-2202
651-633-6004
nalc.mnoffice@thenalc.org

North American Lutheran Seminary

The Rev. Dr. Amy Schiffrin
311 11th Street
Ambridge, PA 15003-2302
724-385-8000
aschiffrin@thenals.org

Bishop

Bishop John Bradosky
jbradosky@thenalc.org

General Secretary

Pastor Mark Chavez
mchavez@thenalc.org

Missions

Pastor Gemechis Buba
gbuba@thenalc.org

Ministry and Ecumenism

Pastor David Wendel
dwendel@thenalc.org

Communications

Pastor Mark Ryman
mryman@thenalc.org

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3500 Mill Run Drive
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Phone: 614-777-5709

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Pastor David J. Baer, editor
news@thenalc.org

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