



NALC EXECUTIVE COUNCIL IS SURVEYING CONGREGATIONS TO HELP NEW BISHOP BEST SERVE NALC CONGREGATIONS

The Executive Council of the North American Lutheran Church is surveying the congregations of the NALC to assess strengths and weaknesses concerning communications and pastoral care within the church body to assist the new bishop of the NALC in building on the NALC's strengths and addressing any concerns.

One of the Core Values of the NALC is to be Congregationally-Focused. The NALC is organized to facilitate the ministries of local congregations. The survey is an effort to live out that Core Value by seeking to determine the ways the church body and the new bishop can best serve NALC congregations.

The 2019 NALC Convocation will elect a new NALC bishop in August. Bishop John Bradosky has announced that he is not available for reelection.

Executive Council members are contacting the pastors of all NALC congregations or congregational presidents if there is no pastor currently serving that church.

The survey asks open-ended questions seeking to gather as much information as possible.

The survey questions are:

1. How are you and your congregation doing?
What's going well? Where are you content?



NALC Executive Council at work (2017 photo)

2. Are there any concerns? Can you identify an area where you would appreciate some help from the NALC leadership to share in your interests?

3. How would you describe your relationship with the NALC and that of your congregation?

The script for the survey explains the purpose of this effort. "We want to touch base with all our congregations' leadership to assess strengths and weaknesses concerning communication and pastoral care ... as a way of describing our current reality in helping to interpret the state of our church body to the new bishop. We are doing this now for the benefit of the bishop-elect. ... We want to understand better how the NALC can be present in the life and ministry of your congregation."

NOMINATIONS SOUGHT FOR POSITIONS TO BE ELECTED AT 2019 CONVOCATION

BISHOP, EXECUTIVE COUNCIL, COURT OF ADJUDICATION WILL BE ELECTED

The NALC Nominating Committee is seeking the names of candidates for nomination to serve in positions to be elected at the 2019 NALC Convocation Aug. 8-9 in Indianapolis, Ind.

The Nominating Committee reports that nominations have been coming in for all positions, but that nominations of lay people are especially needed for the lay position on the Executive Council and for the Court of Adjudication.

The Convocation will elect a new NALC bishop as well as two members of the NALC Executive Council (one lay person and one pastor) and two members of the Court of Adjudication – all to four-year terms. Both pastors and lay members may be elected to the Court of Adjudication.

Brief descriptions of the duties of each position are available at thenalc.org/nominate2019.

Congregations are encouraged to nominate individuals for any of the open positions. Please confirm that individuals are willing and able to serve prior to submitting their names.

Those who feel called to serve in any of these positions are asked to contact the leaders of their congregation to inform them of their openness to serving.

All nominations should be submitted by May 3. This will give the committee the time necessary to compile biographical information on the candidates and comply with the constitutional requirements to provide this information to NALC members.

To submit a name, please complete the Nomination Form available at thenalc.org/nominate2019 and return it to the Nominating Committee.

Nominees will be asked to complete the Nominee Biographical Form (also available online) and to

provide a photo for publication with the biographical information.

To prepare for the nomination and election process for bishop, the Executive Council provided a packet of information to congregations in August. The packet includes a booklet of prayers encouraging NALC members to engage in a year of prayer and discernment leading up to the election.

The prayer booklet, nomination form and more information on the election process may be found online at thenalc.org/nominate2019.

Carolyn Nestingen of St. Paul, Minn., and Pastor Marty Ramey of Dallas, N.C., are completing terms on the Court of Adjudication. Both are eligible for reelection.

Questions may be addressed to the Nominating Committee at nominations@thenalc.org.

LENTEN DEVOTIONS

The Rev. Paull Spring, bishop emeritus of the NALC, and the Rev. Dr. Gemechis Buba, assistant to the bishop for missions, have written Lenten devotions for the North American Lutheran Church.

The Lenten devotions are available in several formats at thenalc.org/lent. The PDF format may be printed for individual reading or distribution in churches.

The devotions are also available in the NALC Walk of Faith app for Apple or Android devices.

You may sign up to receive each day's devotion as a text message or email. For instructions on how to sign up to receive the daily messages go to thenalc.org/lent.

CANADIAN ROCKIES THEOLOGICAL CONFERENCE TO FOCUS ON CATECHISM AS RESOURCE FOR LIFE AND WITNESS

The 2019 Canadian Rockies Theological Conference will be held April 30 through May 3 at the Coast Canmore Hotel and Conference Centre in Canmore, Alberta – just outside of Banff National Park.

This year's theme is "The World Following Christ: The Lutheran Catechism as a resource for life and witness in parish, home and beyond."

Featured speakers are the Rev. Larry Vogel and the Rev. Dr. Nathan Yoder.

Pastor Vogel will talk about how the catechisms may be used as a guide for following Jesus, as a devotional resource and as a tool for evangelism.

Pastor Yoder will explore the marks of Christian discipleship from a Lutheran perspective.

Pastor Vogel is the associate executive director of the Commission on Theology and Church Relations of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. He has been a pastor for 37 years. He recently served on the drafting committee for the 2017 edition of *Luther's Small Catechism with Explanation* from Concordia Publishing House.

Dr. Yoder is pastor of St. Martin's Evangelical Lutheran Church in Maiden, N.C., and the dean of the NALC's Carolinas Mission District. He also serves on the NALC Commission on Theology and Doctrine, the NALC Life-to-Life Discipleship Team and as adjunct faculty for the North American Lutheran Seminary.

The Conference is sponsored by the Canadian Mission District of the NALC.

All are welcome to attend. The conference is designed for both lay and clergy and includes free time for sightseeing in the beautiful Canadian Rocky Mountains.

Registration fee is \$350 (Canadian) including meals or \$250 without meals.



Larry Vogel



Nathan Yoder

More information on the conference is available in the Canadian Rockies Theological Conference group on Facebook or by contacting the organizers Pastor Karl Johnsen at pastorkjohnsen@gmail.com or Pastor Phil Gagnon at pphil1961@icloud.com.

NALC YOUTH GATHERING IN CANADA IS MAY 17-20

The Canadian Mission District is hosting an NALC Youth Gathering May 17-20 at LCBI High School and Bethlehem Lutheran Church in Outlook, Saskatchewan.

The theme of the gathering is "Love Large."

Keynote speaker is Gary Pecuch, youth ministry coach for the NALC.

The event will feature worship, music, mission, and "Larger than Life" games.

For more information contact organizers at nalccanadayouth@gmail.com.



The Rev. Stephen Pullis, director of evangelization, catechesis and schools for the Archdiocese of Detroit, talked about the archdiocese's "Unleash the Gospel Initiative."



The Rev. Charles Zlock, pastor of the Church of St. Monica in Berwyn, Pa., explained discipleship efforts in his congregation.

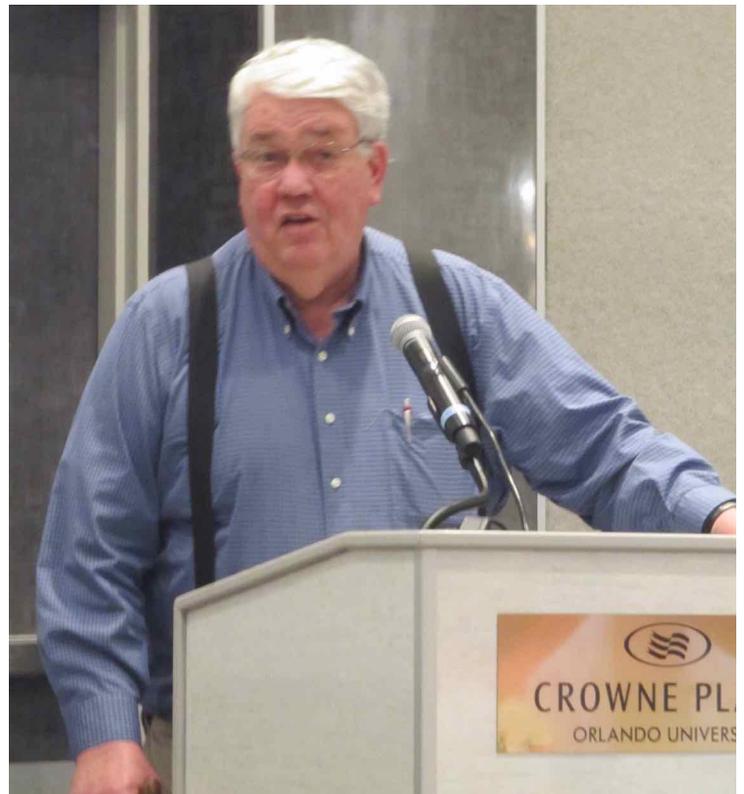
2019 NALC PASTORS' CONFERENCE



About 200 people attended the 2019 NALC Pastors' Conference Feb. 19-21 at the Crowne Plaza Orlando Universal Boulevard Hotel in Orlando, Fla.



The Rev. John Bradosky, bishop of the NALC, led a meeting of the NALC Ministerium.



The Rev. Dr. James Nestingen offered a study of the lectionary Gospel readings for Lent and Easter.



Bishop John Bradosky presided at a service of Holy Communion, including the renewal of ordination vows and the blessing of anointing oil for use in congregations. The Rev. Dr. David Wendel, assistant to the bishop for ministry and ecumenism, served as assisting minister and led daily prayer throughout the conference.

RESPONDING TO PERSECUTION IN HIM

Bishop John Bradosky preached the following sermon, based on Luke 6:20-31, at the 2019 NALC Pastors' Conference which was held Feb. 19-21 in Orlando, Fla.

Grace, mercy and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

It is with both joy and sorrow that I greet you today. It is a pleasure to be with you, but it will be the last time I will do so as your bishop at a meeting of our ministerium. I have experienced great joy and fulfillment in executing my duties in this office, and while I know that it is the right time for such a transition, I did not anticipate the grief and loss in relinquishing this role. My joy and fulfillment come through the relationships we have shared over nearly a decade. While my role will change, my love and commitment to you and your congregations will never change. Because of the nature of your ministry, life in our congregations and our context in this world, the words of the Gospel are vitally important to proclaim.

Let us turn our attention to the words of our Lord Jesus Christ. But first, let us pray ...

We live in a world of instant gratification. We want it our way right away. We desire faster internet speeds, the latest in cell phone technologies that keep us in touch constantly. All forms of transportation are now designed so we can eat, sleep and remain productive — maximizing every moment, even in transition. The thing we *need* the most is what we desire the least — patience. We have little time to look forward to things to come when we are immersed in the immediacy of the present.

Translating the impulsiveness of our secular world into our Christian lives causes many Christians to be confused and struggle. Many Christians believe we should have peace and rest right now. No waiting. For our faith God should bless and reward us with a lack of problems. Christians shouldn't get sick. Christians shouldn't have trouble paying their bills. Christians shouldn't have problems with their marriages or difficulties raising their children.



FROM THE BISHOP

REV. JOHN BRADOSKY
BISHOP

Congregations shouldn't struggle. Pastors shouldn't experience loss. The peace, joy and bliss of heaven ought to be ours immediately, instantly, right now. These should be the privileges. They should be part of our membership.

This confusion occurs when we are normed by our culture and not by the Word of God. Paul says in Romans 1:21-23, "Yes, they knew God, but they wouldn't worship him as God or even give him thanks. And they began to think up foolish ideas of what God was like. As a result, their minds became dark and confused. Claiming to be wise, they instead became utter fools. And instead of worshiping the glorious, ever-living God, they worshiped idols" (NLT).

This situation not only describes our world but the predicament that the Church has been facing for many decades. When you trust your own emotions over the Word of God, you end up creating and worshiping idols. When you trust your own emotions over the Word of God, you end up worshiping yourself, following your own ideas, your own wisdom. When you trust your own emotions over the Word of God, you leave the light for the darkness, you leave clarity for confusion, you leave the truth for a lie, you worship your own foolish ideas instead of the glorious ever-living God.

We like to think of ourselves as much wiser than those who came before us, but the truth is that the faithful who came before us were often much wiser, often stronger in their faith and consistently bolder in their proclamation of the Gospel. We want

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convenience. They gave of themselves sacrificially for the sake of Christ and His Church.

One of the sights in Rome that left me breathless was the Coliseum. It was not just the massiveness, design and construction of the building, but the fact that it was a place where countless thousands of Christians were persecuted for their faith in Jesus Christ. While the crowds filled this stadium and roared for the lions, Christians were mauled, torn to pieces and devoured. The lions were undefeated on their home field. Not one was able to tame them or withstand their strength for long. Yet the Christians kept coming, offering their lives as a testimony to the greater truth and reality of life in Christ. Inside the Coliseum there is a large steel cross to remember all those Christians who would not deny Jesus to preserve their life.

“Blessed are you when people hate you and when they exclude you and revile you and spurn your name as evil, on account of the Son of Man! Rejoice in that day, and leap for joy, for behold, your reward is great in heaven; for so their fathers did to the prophets” (Luke 6:22-23 ESV).

How can the persecuted be blessed? No one in his or her right mind finds pleasure in pain. Yet this is the only beatitude that Jesus repeats for emphasis. It may have been the first time His disciples heard Him say it, but it would not be the last. Jesus made it very clear that a cross was in front of Him and, if they were following Him, a cross was in their future as well.

Jesus didn't hide anything from us. If you are going to be His disciple, then in this life this is what you can expect: Persecution instead of praise. Cruel insults instead of cordial invitations. Harassment instead of honor. Abuse instead of applause. Slander instead of support. And death instead of dignity. Jesus wants us to be prepared for the difficulties that will come as a result of following Him. He said, “I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world” (John 16:33 NIV).

I want to focus on those words of Jesus: “in me.”

Jesus' words in the beatitudes are not a check list or set of conditions that must be met in order to become one of His disciples, but rather directions to those who are already disciples. They are descriptive of what the disciples have when everything else is stripped away. When everything else is gone, they still have the only One that matters, the only One that brings life and purpose for living: Jesus Christ.

The world sets up the standards of perfection and godliness as standards for the lives of the followers of Jesus and does so for the sheer joy of demonstrating how impossible and unhelpful such a quest is. Tragically, there are even some within the Church who engage in the same endeavor with their own form of legalism. Following Jesus has never been about our righteousness, but rather the righteousness of Christ. It is about the One who is in us. There is no room among us for pretentious self-righteousness, but for humility for the grace that is ours in Christ through Word and Sacrament.

Neither Satan nor the world can stand those who trust in Christ instead of themselves. If you are in Christ, then the world will hate you, the devil will target you, and your sinful flesh will give you no rest.

That is why we flee to God's Word, receive absolution for our sins, eat and drink Christ's body and blood, and live in our Baptism. We focus not on check lists or proscriptions for righteous living, but on the One who made us His own, called us, forgives us, strengthens us and saves us, Jesus Christ our Savior.

Lyle Schaller was correct when he wrote that the most divisive issue of this century in American culture will be the interpretation of John 14:6 where Jesus says, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (NIV). The proclamation of that truth makes us intolerable to the culture.

For that reason, Dietrich Bonhoeffer's words seem ageless. He writes, “When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die!” (*The Cost of Discipleship*). Bonhoeffer is reminding us that the cross of Christ, His sacrificial love for the salvation of the world,

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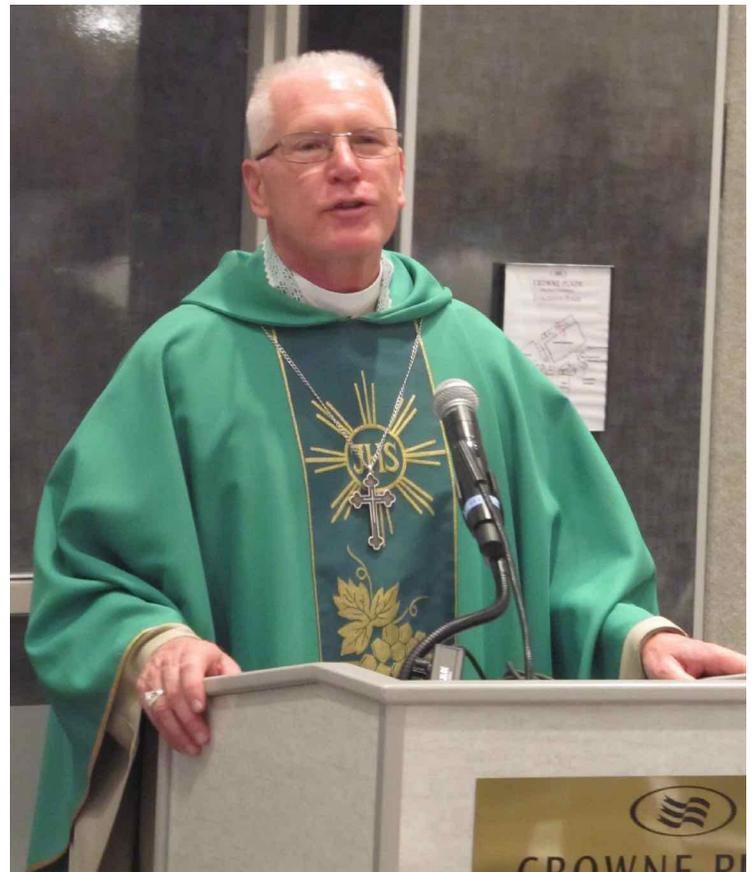
must be manifest in our own lives. His love for you, His presence with you, will give you the capacity to offer yourself as a witness of His redemptive love.

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. When we gather to worship, we gather around the altar to be reminded that Jesus gave everything for us. He laid His life on the altar. The elements of bread and wine are the visible presence of His body and blood, His ultimate and complete sacrifice. We come to worship to offer ourselves completely for His service, everything we have and are we give to Him. This is the nature and power of incarnational or relational love that binds us to Jesus and Jesus to us forever.

In His teaching, Jesus is not describing some alternative reality but the only reality – the kingdom of heaven He came to proclaim. This reality invaded human space in His life, death and resurrection. This kingdom of heaven is a present reality. Life that is lived in Christ and the reality of His kingdom reminds us that this universe is His and it is a perfectly safe place for us to be. Jesus dispels our worry in His preaching and encourages us to engage in self-denying generosity. In His kingdom we are not risking anything. The kingdom of heaven is present because the King of that kingdom is among us: Immanuel, God with us, always, even to the close of this age. It is as Paul told the Greeks on Mars Hill, that “in him we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28 NIV).

In His teaching, Jesus is revealing the way the world looks through God’s eyes, or as Jesus calls it, the kingdom of heaven. Living a life of faith in Jesus, as His disciples, changes our worldview. Such a worldview, of life in Him and in His kingdom, changes everything: our identity, our thoughts, words and behaviors. It is only in Him that true life exists.

Even among Christians, there are many who continue to live in the world rather than in Him. Their lives are filled with skepticism rather than faith in Jesus – disputing the words of Scripture by substituting for its truth the narrow and limited views of human reason and preserving our own powerless reality



Bishop John Bradosky preaches at the 2019 NALC Pastors’ Conference.

while denying the power of His kingdom. Those who heard Jesus teaching back then, and those who hear Him today, believe that Jesus is the one who made all of the created reality and keeps it working, “holding it together” (Colossians 1:17). They believed, as Paul writes, that Jesus held within Himself “all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” (Colossians 2:3). In His teaching, Jesus is exposing, revealing who He is: God in flesh made manifest, the King of His kingdom!

We who follow Jesus must remember that we are not called to simply impart information but to proclaim and model life in Him, and the essential transformation of worldview that changes everything else in our lives, our identity, how we see God, how we view life and death and how we love and care for others. In Him, we are called to reach lives and hearts not just their heads or intellect.

Luther expresses this transformation of worldviews expressed in Jesus’ teaching in the Beatitudes this way,

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These items and promises must be understood by faith in reference to things that are neither seen nor heard and that they do not refer to outward appearances. How can the poor and the mourners be said to look outwardly successful and blessed when, in addition, they have to suffer all sorts of persecution – all things that the whole world and our reason calls trouble and that they say should be avoided? Therefore, whoever wants to have the blessedness and the possessions that Christ is talking about here, must lift up his heart far above all senses and reason. He must not evaluate himself on the basis of his feelings, but he must argue this way: “If I am poor, then I am not poor. I am poor outwardly, according to the flesh; but before God, in faith, I am rich.” Thus, when he feels sad, troubled, and worried, he must not use this standard and say that he is not a blessed man. But he must turn himself over and say: “I feel sorrow, misery, and sadness of heart; but still I am blessed, happy, and settled in Christ, on the basis of the Word of God” (Commentary on The Sermon on The Mount).

Because Jesus knew what He would face in His life and what all who follow Him are bound to face, He gave us some very important teaching about how we can respond to persecution through life in Him. He gives us four important responses: Love, Do Good, Bless and Pray.

In this world’s view, defensiveness comes naturally, retribution and anger destroy relationships, brokenness and hatred become contagious, and communities are destroyed by the pervasiveness of these common responses. But in the midst of persecution in Him – in His kingdom of heaven worldview and in this biblical worldview – Jesus says, “Love, do good, bless and pray” (See Luke 6:27-28 NIV).

Love by treasuring the relationship instead of destroying it. Find ways of getting closer rather than putting distance between you. Those who are hurting will hurt others. It is only love that breaks the cycle of revenge.

Do good. You have nothing to lose because your life is already in Him. Therefore, you can afford to be generous in doing good even to those who are filled with hatred and oppose you, the Church and Christ.

Bless others in tangible ways through acts of kindness: lend, be merciful, give.

Pray for others. Pray for reconciliation and in every way possible seek reconciliation. It is hard to hate those you are lifting up before Christ in prayer. Pray for Christ to enter their lives and for the transformation of their worldview in Him.

Life in Him, in Jesus, reminds us that we are never alone. Isolation is the enemy of the soul. When we think we are all alone we begin to give up hope; we even begin to doubt God. The writer of Hebrews reminds us the grandstands of heaven are filled with those who have gone before us. They are watching and cheering us on to the finish line (See Hebrews 12:1).

Finally, when persecution comes, focus on the promise. Jesus offers those who endure suffering a threefold promise.

First, it is a present promise. Christ is present now and the kingdom of heaven is ours today in Him.

Second, it is a future promise. “Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven” (Matthew 5:12 NIV). The apostle Paul must have been aware of this promise when he wrote, “As it is written: ‘What no eye has seen, what no ear has heard, and what no human mind has conceived’ – the things God has prepared for those who love him” (1 Corinthians 2:9).

Third, it is a perennial promise. Jesus continues, “For in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you” (Matthew 5:12). This is a promise of being identified with God’s chosen people, a promise that is realized both in the present and in the future. To suffer persecution is to walk the same road as the prophets and martyrs. To suffer for what is right is to be part of a great succession.

Beyond the difficulties we will face, we live in a world where Christians are being persecuted, driven from their homes, tortured and massacred, martyred for their faith in Christ. I have been privileged to speak with some of the families of those martyrs. When I asked what I can do for them, they asked me to pray for them and to not forget their witness. Pray that

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those persecuting us will come to faith in Jesus. Pray that what is happening to us will bring out the best in us and not the worst. The best that is in us is Christ, for we are in Him.

What often causes us to vacillate in our worldview is fear. Satan and the world will seek to hold us captive through fear. When I was in Ethiopia, Berhanu Ofgaa, the general secretary of the Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus (EECMY), made that point. He began a conversation by sharing his observation that most American Christians live in fear. When I disagreed, he said: "Yes, you do! You are afraid to proclaim Christ because of what your neighbors will think, what people of other denominations will think, what people of other faiths will think, what political parties will think, what your government will think, what your employer will think. When you live in so much fear you quench the Spirit!"

Our fear makes us passive. The church in America is weakened and declining because of our passivity. Faith and passivity cannot coexist, they are mutually exclusive. Faith has to do with engagement, action and obedience.

The only thing I fear is that the Church of Jesus Christ is becoming increasingly ashamed of the Gospel, passive and unresponsive to what is happening around us. Jesus is calling us to boldly confess Him as the one and only Lord and Savior, the way, the truth and the life, even in a culture hostile to His Gospel. The disciples of Jesus who came before us gave their lives for the sake of that one cause, to boldly proclaim Christ.

While overt persecution of Christians is rampant in many other parts of the world, we who live in this culture must deal with the much more subtle and insidious persecution that sucks us into compromise with false gospels and alternatives to Jesus, undermining both the content of the Gospel and our capacity or need to share it. This persecution requires wisdom and discernment lest we face the greatest persecution of all – marginalization that is so complete there is no reason for the culture to persecute us at all as we have conformed to the culture with our complete passivity.

As I stood before the Coliseum in Rome I thought about another Lion, the Lion of Judah – Jesus Christ. There was never one life that was offered that was not ultimately defended and given new life by the far greater Lion. Not only did this Lion of Judah tame the beasts of the coliseum but the lives of the leaders in Rome and then its people, until faith in this Lion became the faith of the Holy Roman Empire.

Ethiopia experienced tremendous persecution and now has great growth in ministry and mission.

Part of our problem is that when we go through difficulties we think the best is behind us. That is not the nature of the Gospel we proclaim; the best is yet to be! No one is more convinced than the disciples of Jesus who have gone before us. Their witness encourages us to live today with that same hope and promise. Our life is in Him.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

NALC DISASTER RESPONSE ADDRESSING FLOODING IN MIDWEST

Thousands of families have been impacted by recent flooding and storms across the Midwest.

Faith Lutheran Church in Dannebrog, Neb., is flooded, as are the homes of its pastor and most of its members. NALC Disaster Response is delivering emergency relief supplies; flood buckets, health kits, school supplies, Bibles and quilts. Our congregations are responding with donations of material goods, volunteer teams and lots of prayer.

Regular updates are being posted at thenalc.org. Donations may be given online or sent to: NALC Disaster Response; 2299 Palmer Dr., Suite 220; New Brighton, MN 55112.

Contact Mary Bates, NALC Disaster Response coordinator, for more information as to how you can help at disasterresponse@thenalc.org or 740-509-1132.

LENT IS A TIME FOR EQUIPPING

Your people will rebuild the ancient ruins and will raise up the age-old foundations; you will be called Repairer of Broken Walls, Restorer of Streets with Dwellings.

— *Isaiah 58:12 NIV*

By Pastor Brad Hales

Director of Domestic Mission

During this season of Lent, as the North American Lutheran Church journeys from Ashes to Easter, we gather as the Body of Christ as Christians have done for nearly 2,000 years in preparation for celebrating the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

On our Lenten journey, in the NALC Missions Office and with our five national mission teams, we are studying and centering our time together in Scripture around the word “equip.”

The root meaning of the word equipping (*katartizo*) in classical Greek describes what a doctor does. A doctor “equips” a body that has brokenness.

Equipping is to put what is broken into right relationship with the rest of the body. Whether it’s setting a bone or popping a shoulder back into place, the doctor sees each individual part while simultaneously seeing the whole.

Any EMT, doctor or nurse will explain that it is futile to put a small bandage on a big problem. The same is true in our relationship with God, but how often are we satisfied with the quick fix?

God desires more than that. He desires restoration — all of the wrongs being made right, brokenness healed and sin atoned for — that we may come in and go out both now and forevermore. It is the wholeness of the shalom of God.

As disciples — followers of Jesus Christ — we are content no longer to simply be “believers,” for we have had an encounter with the unwavering grace of Jesus Christ who has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of His

Son, in whom there is the redemption and forgiveness of sins.

As we journey to the cross and empty tomb this year with stirred hearts, we recognize this as a time of “equipping,” where the Great Physician takes what is broken and puts it into right relationship with the rest of the body.

Sin has corrupted and distorted our relationships with God and each other. During this season we will be asking tough questions about the lies we believe about our identity as children of God; confessing our brokenness; asking what we need to be healed of; and finally, what we need to lay down so we can be truly free that, as followers of Jesus, we may live into what God is setting right, fixing, repairing and restoring.

Jesus is the ultimate “Repairer of Broken Walls” or “Repairer of the Breach,” and through His death and resurrection, our lives are now built on the Solid Rock, the Ebenezer, the Cornerstone. And not only that, we have been invited into the great journey, for our lives to serve as an Ebenezer — a testimony, a real-life object lesson that we can confess, standing on the shoulders of the giants who have come before, that we too may be called “Repairer of Broken Walls and Restorer of Streets With Dwellings.”

Get ready for NALS month!

**North American Lutheran
Seminary Month**

The month of May is a special time
for all NALC congregations
to remember *your* seminary with

Prayers + Encouragement + Financial Gifts

*Watch your congregation’s mail for details on how you
and your congregation can help grow the Seminary of
the North American Lutheran Church*

BELARUS MINISTRY UPDATE FROM PASTOR VALERY HRYHORYK

By Pastor Valery Hryhoryk

Dear Brothers and Sisters:

Greetings in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ! This is Pastor Valery Hryhoryk, your global worker in Belarus.

Why have I begun my newsletter in such a strange manner? I am sure you know who I am. However, it is always good to remind ourselves who a global worker is. He or she is a person who is sent and supported by the interested party. The Lord said that we need to make disciples in all nations. Belarus is one of them. This country has difficult conditions for ministry and remains hostile to Christ.



This is what the United States Department of State Report on International Religious Freedom in Belarus says:

Minority religious groups continue to have difficulty registering; some groups remain reluctant to apply for registration, due to fear of harassment and punishment. (All unregistered religious activity is prohibited). The government continues surveillance on minority religious groups of various Protestant denominations, especially those it labeled "foreign" or "cults." Religious groups remain cautious about proselytizing and distributing religious materials due to what they say is the general atmosphere of intimidation and fear of punishment. Orthodox literature remains available countrywide. Belarus Orthodox Church (the mainstream Church in Belarus) remains able to proselytize freely and, unlike other religious groups, continues to participate in government-sponsored public events such as rallies without the need to seek prior approval from authorities.

A Roman Catholic priest from Soligorsk was recently banned from his congregation after having served there for 20 years. The authorities banned him without any explanation. Please pray for the freedom of religion in Belarus!



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This winter we have a lot of snow! Almost every day it snows! It is very hard to believe in global warming. We have had snowy winters for the last three years. It reminds me of my childhood when we had to shovel snow and make snowmen!

Our Christmas service in the garage went very well and, as always, we had the opportunity to invite friends and relatives who do not know the Lord. They listened to the Word of God, and we prayed that the seed of faith would be planted in their hearts by the Holy Spirit. We had representatives from the congregations of Polotsk, Orsha, Mazolovo and Vitebsk.

The children received their traditional present, a box of sweets! After the service, there was a concert and a shared meal. Please give thanks to the Lord for our opportunity to gather and celebrate the Lord's birth. All the gatherings in the garage are illegal and can be stopped at any time. I was especially pleased to see Kate, the girl who formerly played in our band. We've prayed for her in the past. I was happy to see how the Lord is working on her faith. Praise the Lord!

God's creation

We are responsible for God's creation around us. The Bible says that nature suffered because of man's sin. In our country, we have many homeless animals. You can see homeless dogs and cats almost everywhere. They live on the streets, in the basements of multi-story buildings where they can find food (people feed them) and where it is warm.



People can be very cruel and throw little kittens and puppies in the street. So we held a rescue operation. Three kittens were rescued from cold and hunger. We had a lot of trouble catching them because they were scared and did not trust anyone. However, they were caught and delivered to the Vet Academy of Vitebsk.

We produced a video to be shared on social media encouraging people to treat God's creation well – to look after the animals and to feed the birds that have difficulty finding food in the winter. Thank you, Lord, for the opportunity to remind our people that they are responsible for God's creation.

Music ministry

We continue to preach the Gospel through music. This ministry is extremely effective. We became good friends with the Vitebsk Cultural Center, and we support them in their projects.

The contemporary music in Russian is very shallow and promotes destructive behavior, drugs, alcohol and sex. There is almost no alternative to this. The most vulnerable layer is the youth. Vitebsk Cultural Center is a state cultural organization that has access to mass media and television.

This month we participated in a concert called "Good Songs" in which we performed spiritual songs. Please thank the Lord for the opportunity to preach the Gospel and to fight for good through music. Also,

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praise the Lord for sending us Andrey, our new solo guitarist. He is a good man and a good musician.

Another big event was the recording of a song called "Christmas Star." The song was put on social media and the radio. The song was recorded with the help of Julietta Tarachan, a professional singer from Filarmonia (a state concert organization).

Literature ministry

Please pray for the distribution of Christian literature. It is important for a book to get into the hands of a reader! We had a big delivery of books to the Koltushi Lutheran Seminary of Ingrian Lutheran Church in St. Petersburg, Russia. The seminary is a good place to start as far as distribution is concerned. The books are valuable for the students and also for everyone who visits the seminary for all kinds of educational occasions. The director of the seminar, Ivan Laptev, was pleased to receive the books.

We are planning a big book delivery to Grodno, where we have the only Lutheran church building standing and functioning as a Lutheran church. However, the building is not owned by the congregation. The government just lets the Lutherans use it for services.

Support of the ministry in the city of Polotsk

There is a congregation in Polotsk, a city 100 kilometers away from Vitebsk. Belarus Lutheran Missionary Fellowship offers support to the congregation. We hold seminars and services together.



Currently, we have many independent Lutheran congregations in Belarus that need help and support. Please pray for such support to continue and develop. It is so vital to have God's light in different parts of Belarus so they are prepared when the right time comes to register a Lutheran national church body.

Please continue to pray for the youth work in Vitebsk and Orsha. It is a very important ministry, a continuation of the summer Bible camps. Please pray for the project of constructing a permanent building in Dolsha so that we can hold Bible events not just in the summer but in all four seasons. This project is vital for the future of the Lutheran church in Belarus.

Please give thanks to God with us for the theological seminar that took place in Vitebsk. Christian education is greatly needed for the young Lutheran church in Belarus. Our teacher was Valery Volodin, a former teacher at Koltushi Lutheran Seminary in St. Petersburg.

New ministry start

For two years we have been praying for the children's projects. They are a great responsibility and also a great blessing. We've contacted the administration of the rehabilitation center for handicapped children in Vitebsk. The children that are kept there are handicapped children with all kinds of mental disorders. We need God's wisdom in



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MISSION IN UGANDA

LUTHERAN LAY RENEWAL

By Bill Oehlschlager

Lutheran Lay Renewal of America

In May of 2018, I was contacted by the Rev. Peter Maganda, dean of the Eastern District of the Lutheran Church of Uganda (LCU) and also dean of students at the Lutheran Theological College in Magamaga.

He was very interested in our renewal weekend program. We sent him all of our material so that the LCU could start planning renewal weekends for congregations in the Eastern Deanery.

Three very successful weekends were held in the fall and, as a result, I was invited by Pastor Peter and Bishop Charles Bameka to visit Uganda for nine days in January.

The primary purpose of the visit was to lead a three-day renewal conference for 80 pastors, evangelists, seminarians and lay leaders at the Lutheran Theological College.

The first two days of the conference we went through our renewal weekend program so that everyone could experience it for themselves. This was followed by an opportunity to talk about what people got out of the program, what they thought the benefits are and if they thought our renewal weekend would be beneficial for their home congregations. The answer was a hearty and unanimous yes!

On the third day, I led a retreat on "Seven Lessons for Living a Spiritual Life," a retreat Lutheran Lay Renewal has led in many congregations across the U.S. This was followed by a Divine Service, with Bishop Charles Bameka preaching.

I had many opportunities to talk to Bishop Charles and other LCU leaders while I was in Uganda and the

bishop told me I was the first person from the NALC to visit Uganda to minister with the church there.

While in Uganda, I also had the opportunity to visit nine congregations with Pastor Peter, including attending the first worship service at a new church plant.

It's amazing to see what the LCU is accomplishing with very limited financial resources.

The Lutheran Church of Uganda was started in 1994 and in 25 years has planted over 140 congregations, and now has more than 50,000 members. Pastors are not paid a salary, as the people are too poor to support a pastor, so pastors have to provide the income to support their families. Many do so by growing and selling crops.

The Lutheran Theological College in Magamaga was built in 2016 and currently has 56 students training to be pastors, with 28 more coming in the next year. The college is in great need of financial support to support students and finish construction, as well as to provide books for the students and the library. The cost to support a seminarian for a year is \$2,500 and only 18 of 56 current students are receiving this support.

Lutheran Lay Renewal is trying to help the seminary by collecting books and the funds to purchase books. A pastor from the U.S. just arrived with copies of the *Book of Concord* to give to the students and the next goal is to be able to give each student a Lutheran Study Bible. Next on the list is *Luther's Small Catechism*.

Any congregation that is willing to help the LCU, please contact me at WAO3RD@aol.com or 724-287-5151, and I'll be happy to give you more details.

THE PANZOS IN MISSION

DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO

By Pastor Didi Panzo

DRC presidential election caused insecurity

After returning to the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) from the United States, where we participated in our daughter Nicole's wedding, we found that people were in a negative mood, so we began to search for the reason. We finally discovered that they were waiting for the election results to know who the next president of the country would be.

They announced the name of the new president as "the alleged winner." The real winner wasn't proclaimed as the president. People weren't enthusiastic and only kept silent to avoid bloodshed. The expectation of the people was not to see Joseph Kabila or his party in power.

Felix Tshisekedi was sworn in on Jan. 24 as the first new president of the DRC in 18 years, despite questions about the credibility of his election victory.

Unfortunately, that didn't make a difference and the plan for retaliation was in place — the internet and communication were cut off. All this made us wonder, so we took time to step back and traveled to



Europe to observe. The time we spent in Europe was very gratifying as we visited our friends who are Lutheran pastors in Germany. We also had a chance to meet with Dr. William Obaga and his wife, Margaret, and share with them our mission plans. Now we are back in the DRC with enthusiasm to serve the Lord.

The life of a farmer

Here is the testimony of a farming couple who have been going through financial hardships. Mr. and Mrs. Luyindula are part of our farmer's forum team. Their home life was chaotic until the day they joined the forum where they listened and learned about God's plan for humanity. Mr. Luyindula considered himself a child abandoned by God because He never provided for his needs. His marriage was close to breaking, and he didn't know what to do. Mr. Tito Senga, who is a friend of Luyindula, told him about our forum gathering.

Luyindula and his wife, Delina Luyindula, came to assist and learned about the plan God has for them as written in Jeremiah 29:11-12 (NIV), "For I know the plans I have for you,' declares the Lord, 'plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you

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hope and a future. Then you will call on me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you.”

After they learned this, we listed them as recipients to receive farming seeds, such as peppers, tomatoes and cucumbers, which they planted and harvested well. From the sales of their crops, they were able to increase their income and send their children to school.

Now they will be planting rice, onion, spinach and many other crops to continue to increase their income. The couple was so thankful for the advice and support and thanked God for His provision.

Child born blind

Mr. Albert Tsobo and Mrs. Emilie live a very poor life in the remote area of Kinzau-Vuete, a city situated 70 kilometers from Boma toward Matadi. Albert Tsobo and Emilie are faithful members of the Confessional Lutheran Church. They are parents of five children. Albert does not have a job and Emilie is an elementary teacher at a private school that helps under-served children. Her salary is \$95 a month, but payment is not consistent. On many occasions she gets paid two to four months late. Albert became an alcoholic and was violent toward his entire family. No one could control Albert's behavior and the church reported their situation to us for counseling.

At the first counseling session, I learned that the couple's youngest child, five-year-old Richard, was



blind from birth, and Albert had never accepted him as his own. Most of the household problems are related to the blindness of the child, and they don't have money to see if they may take the child to a vision clinic for screening. Albert and Emilie are in counseling sessions, and we are praying that we may find an opportunity for Richard to see an eye doctor. Please pray for Richard and his entire family.

Confessional Lutheran Church in Matadi lost a deacon due to a car accident

Deacon Lucky was traveling to Kinshasa for a family issue and the taxi he was in collided with another taxi bus. Since Lucky was sitting in the front, he became the prominent victim of the accident. He died at the scene and his body was transported back to Matadi. It was very sad to see how his biological and church families struggled and mourned for his death.

A group from Boma, including choirs, pastors and we, as missionaries, traveled to Matadi on Wednesday, Feb. 20 and participated in the funeral on Thursday, Feb. 21. May his body rest in peace, and may God provide peace to the church and to his family. Lucky left behind a widow and three young children.

Prayer Requests

- + Pray for God's provision to respond to missional needs.
- + Pray for little Richard and God's miracle for his vision.
- + Pray for Lucky's family.
- + Pray for the DRC's new government.



POLARIZATION OR RECONCILIATION?

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation.

— 2 Corinthians 5:17-19 ESV

Anyone who watches TV news, reads news reports or listens to commentators will be familiar with the charge that we are living in a more polarized time than at any other point in our history. When one researches at least U.S. history (I'm not as familiar with Canadian history), one finds it difficult to conclude our day and age is *more* polarized. Equally polarized, yes. More? Our human nature always seems to divide and isolate us from one another.

The dictionary states that polarization “usually refers to how people think, especially when two views emerge that drive people apart, kind of like two opposing magnets.” Examples of this are readily found in politics, society, business and international affairs. Sadly, we also find polarization within the Body of Christ!

In the Christian congregation in Corinth in the time of St. Paul, there was great polarization, causing great conflict, division and disunity. Martin Luther wrote about this in his Commentary on 1 Corinthians, saying:

St. Paul had taught his Corinthians Christian faith and freedom from the law. But then the mad saints came along, and the immature know-it-alls. They broke up the unity of the doctrine and caused division among the believers. One claimed to belong to Paul, the other to Apollos; one to Peter, the other to Christ. One wanted circumcision, the other not; one wanted marriage, the other not; one wanted to eat food offered to idols, the other not ... some did not believe in the resurrection of the dead, and some thought lightly of the sacrament ... Meanwhile they let the main thing drop – namely that Christ is our salvation, righteousness and redemption – as if they had long since outgrown it ... Yet such people



MINISTRY MATTERS

REV. DR. DAVID WENDEL
ASSISTANT TO THE BISHOP
FOR MINISTRY AND ECUMENISM

can never know our Lord Christ, unless they first become fools again and humbly let themselves be taught and led by the simple word of God.

Are we in the Body of Christ more polarized and divided than those living in Corinth in the first century? Are we in the North American Lutheran Church united as a church body, immune to political machinations, differences over liturgy and worship, unaffected by pressures within and without the Church? Are our congregations one in faith and love, humbly allowing ourselves to be taught and led by the “simple Word of God?” Do we seek unity, forgiveness and reconciliation, according to the “simple Word of God,” or do we allow our opinions, perspectives, hurts and wounds to drive us apart, like two opposing magnets?

We would like to say that this is not how we live in the Body of Christ – whether in the NALC or our individual congregations! Anyone who has lived in Christian community, whether in home, family or church, must admit that, at times, we miss the mark, are divided and cling to our divisions and polarizations. Sometimes we are anything but “ambassadors for Christ,” entrusted with the “ministry” and “message of reconciliation.”

How can the Church, our congregations and we become ambassadors of reconciliation, committed to the ministry and message of reconciliation?

1. Let us become fools again, and humbly let ourselves be taught and led by the simple Word of God. Although the NALC was formed by and

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grounded in a commitment to the truth and authority of God's Word, it is not enough to say that — we are to mean it and live it. Our every disagreement, division or conflict is to be handled in accordance with the Word of God, and, in particular, Matthew 18:15-17. There ought to be no situation in the Body of Christ that is not guided by the Word of our Lord — encouraging direct, person-to-person communication, with the goal of honesty, integrity, repentance, forgiveness and, ultimately, reconciliation!

2. We are to be “new creations” in and through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. God reconciled us to Himself through Jesus Christ. However, that reconciliation was not to end with God and us. We are to then be ministers — ambassadors for Christ and for the reconciliation He intends to bring to all! In response to God's act of reconciliation in Jesus Christ, we are called and sent to seek forgiveness, healing and restoration in every relationship and situation. Anything less is to be unfaithful and inattentive to the Word of God.

3. We are to live differently than the world lives. We are to be in the world but not of the world, as our Lord prays for His disciples at the Lord's Supper (*John 17:14-15*). When disciples and the Church begin to look like “the world,” there is obviously a problem. When disciples and the Church handle conflict, division and disunity in a worldly, secular manner, there is a problem. The Church is not then being the Body of Christ, able to witness to the world a different way, a new way, as new creations in Christ Jesus.

4. “Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God ... if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another” (*1 John 4:7, 11 ESV*). Jesus said, also at the Last Supper, “By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (*John 13:35 ESV*). In a church body that is focused on the Great Commission, discipleship and disciple-making, it is clear that we are to be known by our love for our Lord, love for one another and love for the world. Anything less hinders our witness to the world. Anything less is a barrier to discipleship

and disciple-making. Anything less implies we are not Jesus' disciples! Because God loves us, in Jesus Christ our Savior, let us love one another.

In this season of Lent, a time of reflection, repentance and renewal, let us consider how we are called, not to division, disunity and polarization, but to forgiveness, reconciliation and unity. Let us embody our love for one another every Sunday, as we confess our sins, receive forgiveness and share the peace of Christ as those who have been redeemed and reconciled through the blood of Jesus, the Lamb of God who died to take away the sins of the world. May we have a holy and blessed Lent which leads us to a joyful Easter!

BELARUS MINISTRY

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how to help these children and their parents as they are the most vulnerable. Please pray for this project.

We invite all of you for whom the Lord touches your heart to join us. We agreed to shoot a video about the center to let people know how they can be involved.

I ask you to pray for Ludmila, our new parishioner. Ludmila is a teacher of Belorussian language and her husband thinks she has become caught in a sect. The Lutheran church in Belarus is regarded by the majority of people as a sect. So, people who attend the Lutheran services are viewed as sectarians and traitors of the traditional Orthodox Church. Lord, have mercy!

Dear brothers and sisters, the Lord is great and my mission in Belarus continues in the year 2019. Without your faithful support, this mission would not be possible. Please pray for new partners in this ministry as the tasks are great.

On behalf of Belarus Lutherans I wish you abundant blessings from our Lord for this new year. May you know His grace and wisdom in everything you do!

YOUTH AND FAMILY MINISTRY

By Gary and Laurie Pecuch

Here's a friendly reminder to make sure someone from your congregation is connected with us.

We continue to do monthly webinars, email messages, online courses and website updates. We also do regular Facebook postings and video conference calls. We also offer a high school theological conference at the Nexus Institute.

We are still adding webinar clips to the website the first week of every month. If you need access to the site let us know and we will send you (or anyone in your church) an invite.

We would love to start a conversation with your congregation. We are especially interested in hearing how you go about children's, youth and/or family



ministry. We take what we learn from all of you and share it with others (of course, giving you the credit). Don't know where to start? Let's schedule a video conference call.

Mark your calendars for the Ventures in Youth Ministry Symposium to be held Aug. 5-6, during Lutheran Week in Indianapolis, Ind. This year's topics will be primarily focused on building spiritual disciplines and people skills into young people.

Gary and Laurie Pecuch serve the NALC as youth ministry coaches. You may contact them at families@thenalc.org.

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