

Who Is Like the Lord Our God?

by [Pr. Brett Jenkins](#), NALC pastor from Pennsylvania and former board member of Lutheran CORE



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As a friendly commenter noted, my last article needed some serious editing. It is never good for me to find myself writing too close to a deadline; the result is always technically correct but dense, jargon-heavy prose that obscures what it seeks to clarify. My apologies to all.

To restate succinctly what I was driving at in my last installment, in contrast to what any group might claim, we can tell what that group truly holds sacred on the one hand by what things, actions, and speech they extol and prescribe, and on the other, those at which they take offense. Sacredness is defined for a group by what they revere and what they revile. That which is prescribed constitutes the group’s dogmas or orthodoxy. That which is proscribed or treated as blasphemous is like a photographic negative of the same thing, defining the sacred by contrasting it to its inverse, the profane. This is a sociological and functional, not theological, definition of the sacred.

I ended my last article by saying, “Progressive Christianity quickly ceases to be formally Christian precisely because it holds different things to be sacred than does the Biblical, Apostolic faith ... it represents a different religion, not a different way to be Christian.”

Though I differ with his work on many points, one thing that the enormously popular psychologist Jordan Peterson has helped me understand is that human thought is intrinsically and inescapably hierarchical. Believing that we can actually *think* in a truly egalitarian

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Escaping Egypt: Undeserved Loyalty

by [Dr. Brian Hughes](#), Lutheran CORE Board Vice-President



Editor's Note: Lutheran CORE is collecting and possibly publishing stories from our readers and congregations about the process they followed when they tried to exit the ELCA — successfully or not — including any abuse by church authorities towards their congregation. This article is the first in our new Escaping Egypt series.

He replied to him, “Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?” Pointing to his disciples, he said, “Here are my mother and my brothers.” Matthew 12: 48-49

One of the most common characteristics of adult children of alcoholics is that they tend to be very loyal. Despite all of the hardships that they went through, adult children usually stand by their parents regardless of the way they were treated. John A. Smith, Psychotherapist

Hi. My name is Brian and I'm an adult child of alcoholics (ACOA). I've had friends in ministry question why it took so long for me to finally exit the ELCA and roster with another church body, a fair question and one that needs to get lifted for those who are still inside. Make no mistake, as our director Dennis Nelson has begun to warn, the doors are likely to slam shut next August at the national ELCA Assembly. So why are you and your congregation still inside, especially if you're a moderate, grace-filled compassionate confessional Lutheran?

So why DID I hang in so long? I served as Assistant to the Bishop of the Sierra Pacific Synod in the early 2000s when the advocates came after me, tried to destroy my career because I was merely a moderate and not a champion for their movement of change. As I like to say, I didn't know what the

words slander, libel and defamation meant, but my attorney wife did. I left that call, moved to the other side of the country (Maryland) and helped continue building out a prevailing ministry, but still in the ELCA until finally retiring early and leaving January 2020.

Welcome to the world of ACOAs. We give prodigious loyalty long after it's not warranted or deserved. We're hard wired to hang in there no matter how bad it gets. We also tend to overachieve and become Type A personalities which can lead to other issues like stress-induced cardiac problems. Someday ask me about the heart attack I had underwater while on a shipwreck. It's a great story. It helps to explain why some of us aging confessional Lutherans hung on despite all we experienced, all we observed, all we came to understand about the trajectory of the ELCA. Undeserved loyalty.

Like many of his generation my dad never talked about his experiences in WWII. Later in life I came to know he was a medic in the European Theater and, through education and pastorally interacting with Middle East deployed veterans, I have come to understand the impact PTSD has on them. I can only imagine the horrors my dad witnessed during his generation's war, but as a child I didn't understand why he drank so much, physically abused our mom and yelled at me and my sister. With these ingredients properly measured and poured into the cauldron of development an ACOA was formed.

So brothers and sisters still inside, why are you still there and what are your hopes going forward? My moment of decision to go was when, in 2018, the ELCA at their national youth gathering put a chemically and surgically mutilated child on stage and celebrated God's handiwork in creating a trans child. And at that moment it was clear they were not my brothers and sisters and likely not disciples of Jesus either. The pull of loyalty was broken. How about you?



Is Even Greater Conflict on the Horizon?

by [Pr. Dennis D. Nelson](#), Lutheran CORE Executive Director



Structural and governance changes will most certainly come about from the work of the ELCA's Commission for a Renewed Lutheran Church. An all-encompassing redefinition of mission and ministry will most certainly result from the recommendations, expectations, requirements or whatever that will be laid upon congregations because of the DEIA audit which the ELCA had done of its governing documents. The provision for bound conscience will very possibly be eliminated as part of the review and re-evaluation of the 2009 human sexuality social statement. As I keep up on the latest of what may be coming for unsuspecting ELCA congregations, I realize that conflict within congregations might only become more severe leading up to and after the next ELCA Churchwide Assembly in August 2025.

In June of 2013 – just a little over a year before I retired – the synod in which I was rostered, Southwest California, elected the ELCA's first openly gay synodical bishop. That election threw the congregation where I had already been serving for thirty-nine years into total turmoil and conflict, and that was a conflict that continued throughout and beyond my final twelve months there. And I found that since I had already announced my retirement because I would be leaving after forty years there, I was totally unable to provide leadership, guidance, and stability in the situation. That was a situation that the congregation would have to work through without me. I was not in a position to help them in any way during my final year there.

Friends of Lutheran CORE who are a part of ELCA congregations will find themselves in many different kinds of situations in regard to the upcoming changes in the ELCA. Do any of the following

describe your situation?

- In some ELCA congregations there will be strong agreement among the pastor, leaders, and members that the time to leave the ELCA is now and action needs to be taken as soon as possible in case the coming changes in structure and governance make it even more difficult if not impossible even for former ALC congregations to leave with their property.
- In some congregations there is no way that a motion to disaffiliate from the ELCA will prevail. Even if a majority are in favor of leaving, they will not be able to achieve two separate votes with at least two-thirds of those voting approving a motion to disaffiliate.
- In some congregations the pastor has kept information regarding what is actually happening in the ELCA from the people.
- Some friends of Lutheran CORE are the only one in their congregation (or one of very few in their congregation) that is aware and concerned. They have faithfully sought to inform others, but their efforts fall on deaf ears.
- Some former LCA congregations and mission congregations started by the ELCA believe that they would never receive permission from their synod council to leave with their property and/or would not be able to pay back to the synod the mission start funds expended by the synod that the synod would demand be repaid.
- Some congregations are too diminished and/or the membership does not have the energy left to deal with the issue. If they are aware of S13.24, they are just hoping that the synod will not use that provision in the model constitution for synods against them to justify the synod's moving in, taking over, and possibly closing the congregation.
- I know of a vibrant, Biblically faithful, Spanish language ministry where the synod owns the building and most of the salary of the pastor is paid by the synod and churchwide.

There are Biblically faithful, confessional pastors in the ELCA who do not believe that the right

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The Existential Crisis Facing So Many Congregations

by [Pr. Don Brandt, Congregational Lay-Led Initiative \(CLI\)](#)



The Lutheran Congregations in Mission for Christ (LCMC), on its website, lists the average worship attendance of each of their 818 U.S. congregations. This data represents a veritable “treasure trove” of information when it comes to how many of these congregations might be facing a crisis in the coming years concerning the viability of their ministries. (This kind of information, by the way, is not available on the NALC or ELCA websites.) Regarding the accuracy of these numbers, we need to keep in mind that the diligence of congregations in regularly updating their reported average attendance is probably a “mixed bag”. To my knowledge the LCMC does not contact their churches each year to insure that the reported attendance figure is up to date. And there’s another reality to consider: the cross-denominational impact of the pandemic on worship attendance. We know that many churches saw their attendance drop between 10 and 40 percent between 2020 and 2023. And some churches never fully recovered their losses in terms of in-person average attendance. However, to avoid argument, I will assume that the LCMC attendance data is reasonably accurate and up to date.

Before summarizing this data I want to pose this question: *At what point—when it comes to average attendance—are most churches facing nothing less than an existential crisis?* And for those churches facing such a crisis is there anything that can and/or should be done to maintain and preserve the viability of their congregational ministries? Also, at what point do these smaller churches need to be asking whether they will always be able to assume the availability of an ordained pastor to lead them?

The following information represents the results of my online “survey.” **Of the 818 LCMC churches in the U.S. 484 churches report an average weekly worship attendance of 75 or less. And of these churches, 276 report a weekly attendance of 40 or less.** Now given what I know regarding the current costs involved in calling a full-time pastor, I believe many of these 484 churches will be unable, in the coming years, to afford a full-time pastor’s salary with benefits and housing. And because of the current clergy shortage, qualified pastors who *are* looking for a call usually have more than one opportunity to consider. This gives a distinct advantage to those congregations that are able to offer the better salary and benefits package. (In other words, usually larger churches.)

So what of the possibility of calling a part-time ordained pastor; especially when it comes to the 276 churches that have 40 or fewer people in worship each week? This is definitely a possibility for churches that can no longer afford a full-time pastor. However, as with full-time candidates, there is also a shortage of part-time pastors. And with part-time pastors, call committees typically need to find a candidate that is close enough to commute to their community. This factor, above all, limits the options when it comes to finding a qualified part-time pastor, especially in rural settings. Then the usual fallback option is to find one or more “supply preachers” who live within driving distance of the congregation. One more possibility to consider for these churches: enlist (and “train?”) one or two (or more) active members to share preaching responsibilities.

Here is the “bottom line”; **too many smaller churches are making the erroneous assumption that they can stake their congregation’s future on always being able to find, call and afford an ordained pastor.** This is simply not the case for most of these smaller congregations. When considering the LCMC, 60% of their congregations serve 75 or fewer worshipers in a typical week. And over one-third of their churches serve 40 or less worshipers.

It is time for smaller congregations to consider long-term ministry strategies that do *not* assume the ongoing availability of ordained pastors. Here—on a more constructive note—are some options that congregational leaders from these churches need to consider. And sooner rather than later.

1. Consider whether one, two or three active members might be enlisted and trained to become part-time lay ministers for your congregation. Their “training” could be online; either from Lutheran seminaries (like St. Paul Seminary), or through

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Free Webinar on Church Conflict

by [Pr. Dennis D. Nelson](#), Lutheran CORE Executive Director



At the church in southern California where I served as pastor for forty years we had a large Christian day school that went from preschool to eighth grade. The Christmas programs put on by the students (preschool, K-3rd grade, 4th-8th grade) were always excellent and we knew that for many parents attending their child's program would be the only time when they would hear the Christmas message.

The reality was that rehearsals and preparations for the programs basically took over the sanctuary from late November through the middle of December. All the chancel furniture was removed and one hundred forty chairs were set up in the chancel. The chancel was set up for the rehearsals early Monday morning and it stayed that way throughout the week until Friday afternoon when the chairs were removed and the chancel furniture was put back for Sunday morning. Normally it all worked out just fine.

But one year the ninety-nine-year-old mother of a prominent member died in early December. My first thought was, "I am toast. No matter what happens, I will not survive this one unscathed." If I tell the prominent member that the sanctuary is not available for her mother's funeral, I am toast. If I tell the day school teachers that they are going to have to remove all the chairs and put the chancel furniture back an extra time, I am toast. I saw no way that this one was going to resolve easily and well.

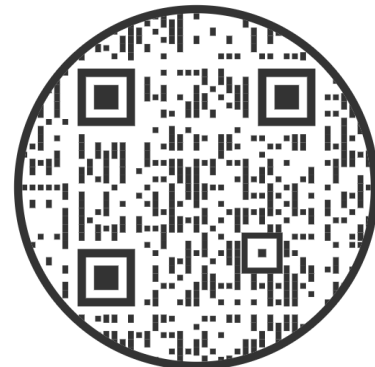
But then the prominent member told me that she wanted to have a memorial service for her mother the following September on what would have been her mother's 100th birthday. I told her, "That is a wonderful idea!" My heart said, "Thanks be to God!"

But I have to admit that most of the conflict situations that I had to deal with during my forty years of pastoral ministry did not work out so well or so easi-

ly. So I am very grateful to Lutheran CORE vice president and retired NALC pastor Brian Hughes for offering a free webinar entitled "Managing Church Conflicts without losing your passion, soul, or job" on Wednesday, November 20 from 11 AM – 12 noon Eastern Standard Time. [Here](#) is a link where you can sign up for the free webinar. I have signed up, and I encourage you to do the same. Brian writes regarding the webinar, "Pastors and other leaders are usually put in the crosshairs of church conflicts as ideas, needs, and personal desires jockey for position. Join us as we examine stages of conflicts, types of conflicts, and how to bring down the temperature or, when required, press through to a new consensus."



Scan Here to Reach CORE's Website



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manner is not merely logically, but *neurologically* incorrect; our brains could literally not handle the amount of incoming sensory data presented to it by the rest of our nervous system if it did not prioritize some information over others. Thinking hierarchically is identical to thinking at all.

In a hierarchy, whatever occupies a higher position determines the relative value of everything beneath it. Why in CPR training do they use the acronym “ABC”—airway, breathing, circulation—to anchor the care provider in the moment of crisis? Because while the heart is needed to pump oxygen to the rest of the body, the lungs must be filled with oxygen before it can get to the heart, and the lungs can only be filled by artificial respiration if the airway is in turn clear. The operation of that which is lower in the hierarchy is contingent upon the proper function of that which is higher.

What is true in an operational hierarchy is equally true in a conceptual hierarchy. In fact, you can determine an idea’s place in a conceptual hierarchy precisely by identifying whether another idea is dependent upon or foundational to it. Within a religious schema, this translates to what is holy, holier, or holiest.

While in seminary, one of my professors quoted one of his own graduate school mentors, lauding to us the sage wisdom that “your theology can never be any better than your anthropology.” I made a phone call that afternoon to a mentor of my own, a double Ph.D. whose own generous but well-defined orthodoxy had catapulted him to a position of great responsibility in his own Christian tradition as an ecumenical theologian, to check whether my response was too reactionary. “That,” he said, confirming my intuition in the carefully measured tone of voice I had come to associate with him at his scholarly best, “seems to me to be *precisely* backward.”

The sentiment commended by my professor placed humanity (or humanity’s assertions about God) above God’s revelatory self-disclosure. In fact, its effect was to negate any possibility of the latter by placing humanity above God epistemologically. This professor’s spouse, when presiding at the Eucharist during the final worship service I attended at that school, began the Lord’s Prayer with the unbiblical and self-congratulatory phrase, “Our father and mother in heaven.” I refused to receive Communion that day not because her ego was out of control (the sins of the presider do not invalidate the grace of

God) but because I was no longer sure it actually was the Eucharist, and that was because I was no longer sure the Christian God, the God that commanded His people to “have no other gods before Him,” was in fact being worshiped in that space.

If Christ is not “the image of the invisible God” (Col. 1:15), if it is not true that “if we have seen [Jesus], we have seen the Father” (John 14:9), and the Bible is not in fact a revelatory portrait of that Christ to us, something—in this case humanity—must replace the Triune God in the highest position within the religious hierarchy, whether historically Christian vocabulary is used to describe it or not.

By definition, that is some other religion than Christianity.

Is Even Greater Conflict on the Horizon?

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approach for their congregation would be to seek to disaffiliate from the ELCA. There are many reasons for this. Some feel that a motion to disaffiliate would not prevail. Some fear that it would only be disruptive in the life of the congregation. Some believe that they can keep the changes coming in the ELCA from impacting their congregations. We need to be praying for these ELCA pastors and their congregations.

We are very grateful for the friends of Lutheran CORE who are members of other Lutheran church bodies who are concerned about and regularly pray for their fellow Christians still in the ELCA.

With the changes that are certainly coming and the wide variety of situations that friends of Lutheran CORE find themselves in, Brian Hughes is planning a series of webinars for upcoming months. The themes for the webinars will follow the life of Moses and his leading the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt through the wilderness into the Promised Land. Here are the planned topics.

November – Conflict Management

Groaning under Egyptian captivity; understanding what is coming in the ELCA and the stages and types of church conflict that might engender and how to navigate them without burning out

February – Vision Casting

The hope of the Promised Land; effective ways of pointing to a preferred future

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The Existential Crisis Facing ...

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- lay minister training programs like Beyond the River Academy or the LCMC Texas Mission District's Harvest Workers ministry. Online courses might focus on biblical studies, Lutheran theology, and preaching.
2. Check out Lutheran CORE's [Congregational Lay-leadership Initiative \(CLI\)](#), which would mean having an "outside" coach to help your congregation address this ministry challenge. (Full disclosure: I am the person for you to contact to find out more about CLI.)
 3. Contact your regional mission district leader and ask for one or two names of competent retired Lutheran pastors who might be willing to enter into an online coaching relationship with your church council. The primary focus of such a relationship is to prepare your congregation for a future that might not necessarily include an ordained pastor.
 4. And the *best* long-term strategy might be to "raise up" someone among your active members who would consider eventually becoming your future ordained pastor. This person might be active retired, or someone younger who would become a bi-vocational pastor, or a stay-at-home parent who has reached the empty-nest stage of life. Obviously not all congregations have such a potential "candidate." However, my guess is that too few congregations are even asking the question as to whether such a person is already a part of their congregational life.

What about *your* congregation? Are you currently without a pastor? Or is your current pastor close to retirement? Does your church have an average weekly attendance of (approximately) 75 or less? Or 40 or less? Has your attendance been declining over the last five years? Or longer? If you have been in decline, and that decline continues, what do you anticipate your attendance will be in 2030? What do you guess is the average age of your active members? Is it old enough where your decline might actually accelerate?

These are difficult questions to even reflect upon, let alone discuss with your lay leaders. However, this is a discussion smaller congregations definitely need to have. We are entering an era when most congregations will not be able to depend on available ordained pastoral leadership. We cannot afford to put off confronting this ministry challenge. It's time to act.

If you have any questions for me, including whether I can be of some assistance, email me at...

pastordonbrandt@gmail.com

Is Even Greater Conflict on the Horizon?

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March – Grief and Change

Loss and renewal in the wilderness; understanding the process of transition and how to maintain momentum and forward direction

April – Organizational Structure and Succession Planning

New rules for a new reality; constitution and bylaws for the mission field

Stay tuned.

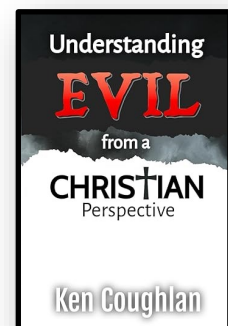
Video Ministries— "Understanding Evil From a Christian Perspective"

by [Pr. Dennis D. Nelson](#), Lutheran CORE Executive Director

Many thanks to Ken Coughlan for giving us a video review of his recent book, "Understanding Evil from a Christian Perspective." Ken is a Christian apologist and religion teacher at St. Paul's Lutheran School in Glen Burnie, Maryland. He earned his JD from the College of William & Mary and after practicing law for over two decades, graduated with honors from Luther Rice College and Seminary with an MA in apologetics. He is a frequent speaker, preacher, and teacher on a wide variety of apologetic topics.

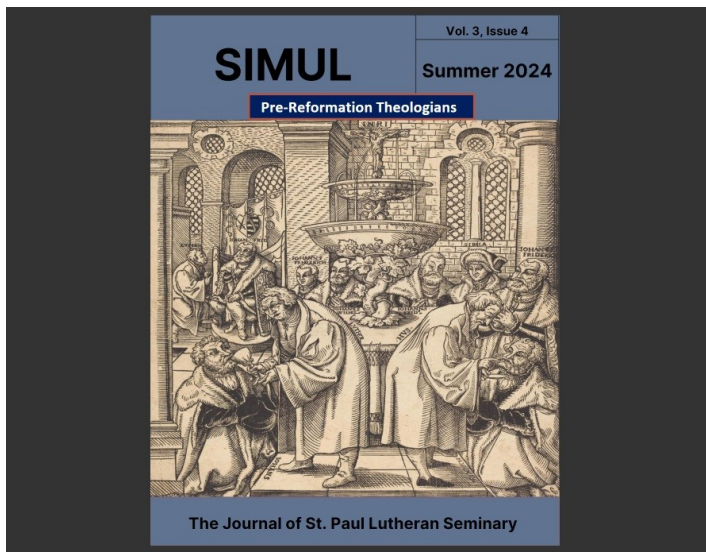
A link to Ken's video book review can be found [here](#). A link to our YouTube channel, which contains over fifty reviews of books and videos on topics of interest and importance, can be found [here](#).

Ken Coughlan introduces this book as a comprehensive explanation of how Christians understand evil. What does it mean? Can it exist alongside a loving God? How did it enter the world? Is God doing anything about it? The book is written so that it will be accessible to the layperson without skimping on content.



SIMUL: Summer 2024

by [Dennis Di Mauro](#), pastor at Trinity Lutheran Church (NALC) in Warrenton, VA.



Dear Friends,

The latest issue of *SIMUL*, the Journal of St. Paul Lutheran Seminary, on “Pre-Reformation Theologians,” has dropped! And best of all, it’s free!

Click here: https://issuu.com/stpaulsimul/docs/issue_12_v4

This edition delves into the historical roots of Lutheranism with several insightful articles about pre-Reformation theologians. In this volume, Mark Menacher begins our study with a well-researched article on the life and work of John Wycliffe. Menacher examines the similarities and differences between Wycliffe’s theology and later Lutheran thought, while also lamenting his acceptance of the prevailing justification theology of his day. St. Paul Lutheran Seminary graduate and pastor Leah Krotz offers a beautifully written essay on the work of 15th century Czech theologian Jan Hus. Krotz explains how Hus’ courageous search for the truth of scripture still resonates today. Mark Ryman takes a somewhat broader approach to the topic, exploring how Hus’ and Wycliffe’s works personally influenced Luther, especially in the formulation of the Reformation doctrines of *Sola Scriptura* and *Semper Reformanda*. Ryman also contributes a beautiful hymn entitled “Wyclif,” sung to the tune of the 1887 hymn “Wycliff,” written by John Stainer. And I finish out this issue with a book review on Lauro Martinez’s history (that reads like a novel), entitled *Fire in the City: Savonarola and*

the Struggle for the Soul of Renaissance Florence published by Oxford University Press (2007). What can this little monk from Ferrara teach us about having the courage to stand up against corruptions that might arise in the Church?

SIMUL can be read three ways. One can enlarge and read through the flip book on the top of the webpage (there is a full screen button that can be clicked on the lower right-hand side of the flipbook, and you can double-click or use the zoom slider at the bottom of the page for even more magnification), or one can scroll down and read each individual article. This second option allows readers to share individual articles (that can be read on a cellphone) without sending the entire issue. You can also download a pdf to your device and keep it forever!

Enjoy!

Dennis

Coming Events

- **Free Webinar “Church Conflict”** — November 20, 2024 from 11 am—12 pm EST. Click [here](#).
- **Free Webinar “Vision Casting”** — February 19, 2025 from 11 am—12 pm EST. Details TBD.
- **Free Webinar “Grief and Change”** — March 19, 2025 from 11 am—12 pm EST. Details TBD.
- **Free Webinar “Organizational Structure and Succession Planning”** — April 23, 2025 from 11 am—12 pm EST. Details TBD.
- **BYLD: Building Youth As Leaders Who Are Disciples of Christ**—Geneva College, Beaver, PA. July 7-12, 2025. Click [here](#).
- **2025 ELCA Churchwide Assembly**—Phoenix, AZ. July 28 - Aug 2, 2025. Click [here](#).
- **NALC Lutheran Week 2025**—Pittsburgh, PA. August 3, 2025—Aug 8, 2025. Click [here](#).
- **LCMC 25th Annual Gathering & Convention** — Lakeville, MN. October 5-8, 2025. Click [here](#).

More events: <http://lutherancore.website/events/future/>

CORE Voice Newsletter

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