

## What's Next With the ELCA?

by [Pastor Dennis D. Nelson](#), Executive Director of Lutheran CORE (ELCA)



### In This Issue:

- The 2028 Assembly (CWA)
- Who is seeking orthodoxy and orthopraxy?
- Sin, rebellion against God and rejection of His Son
- The median age of Protestant pastors
- New video book review by Pr. Schoelles on Don Brandt's new devotional

One thing we can know for sure – no matter how far the ELCA goes, it will not stay there. It will only get worse.

[HERE](#) is a link to a list of articles that we have written regarding the ELCA covering the period of time between the 2022 and 2025 Churchwide Assemblies along with a summary of the major points from each of these articles.

We begin with a Review and Evaluation of the 2022 Churchwide Assembly. This is the gathering that called for the creation of a Commission for a Renewed Lutheran Church and a reconsideration of the 2009 human sexuality social statement, including the whole issue of bound conscience. We then have two articles regarding the formation of the Commission entitled, “Once You Know the Makeup You Know the Outcome.”

Next we have links to several articles regarding recommendations that came to the 2025 Assembly as a result of actions taken by the 2022 Assembly –

An Analysis of the First Set of Recommendations from the Human Sexuality Social Statement Reconsiderations Task Force

An Analysis of Constitutional Amendments that came from the Church Council to the 2025 Churchwide Assembly

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## The Lord's Inheritance

by [Pr. Brett Jenkins](#), Pastor of Holy Cross Lutheran Church, Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, and Dean, NE Mission District, NALC

If you are at all plugged into what is going on outside of Lutheran circles, you have undoubtedly seen news related to the surge of thirty-five and under young people (particularly young men) who are coming back to church... or exploring the faith for the first time.

But they are not just showing up at any church. These young people have done their homework. There is no societal or family expectation from their religiously milquetoast parents that they be in church, and a high percentage of their friends are involved in neo-paganism or the various identity categories that serve a religious function in the lives of their adherents. No, they have come to the end of all that or else they have sensed as much as deduced that something is radically wrong with the world they inhabit.

When they show up at the doorsteps of the church, they have already “deconstructed” the secular, progressive faith into which they were catechized by both their education and the liturgical cycle of television, YouTube, and social media, for they have experienced its devastating fruits in either their own lives or the lives of those they love. By the time they warm a pew for the first time, they may know more about the controversy regarding whether and when the exodus happened, the debates at the Council of Nicaea II, or the history of the Reformation than the pastor preaching to them remembers or maybe ever knew.

While they may know they need spiritual formation and are hungry for such, while the pastor or any experienced Christian may quickly discern how partial or narrow their autodidactic catechesis has been, they are mostly not showing up the way people showed up at church a generation ago did. They are not seeking a vague “spirituality,” to “teach their kids morals,” or “doing what comes naturally” once the halcyon days of their twenties are over and it is time to “settle down.” They have gagged on the modernist Kool-Aid and are seeking an emetic to get the toxins out of their system.

So, they are seeking out orthodoxy and *orthopraxy*. To the consternation and frustration of theological progressives everywhere, these people are seeking out Latin mass and Eastern Rite catholic parishes, vital Orthodox congregations, and traditionalist Protestant communities. Popular YouTube theologian Jordan Cooper has done some reflecting on why such people seem more drawn to Anglicanism than



Lutheranism, but I think his reflections miss one key point; Lutheranism defines itself—at least in part—over and against the very thing these young people are looking for... tradition.

Because of our polemical family history (recounted each autumn as Reformation Sunday rolls around), we emphasize theological and Biblical argument rather than the reception of a precious, historical (and so immutable) heritage.

This need not be so. I am not here proposing that we should downplay our history or heritage, but rather that we should tell the whole story. The Reformation may have settled upon the material principle of the Reformation as justification by grace alone (*sola gratia*) through faith alone (*sola fide*) and the formal principle of the Reformation as revelation through Scripture alone (*sola Scriptura*), but the hermeneutic principle that brought the Reformers to these conclusions was *ad fontes*—back to the sources. The Lutheran Reformation in particular was an attempt to recover what had been lost, restore what had become corrupt, and expose again the foundation upon which all later Christian theology was built. It does not take much time with the Church Fathers to discover that as they debated the doctrines that would later be deemed the dogmas of the faith, they used the canonical Scriptures to justify their positions. That must mean that the Scriptures were more fundamentally authoritative than the theologians (however exalted intellectually or hierarchically) who interpreted them... *Sola Scriptura*.

As Martin Chemnitz pointed out beautifully, the Lutheran Reformation was not ultimately about rejection of *tradition*, but rejection of *authority* that made claims contrary to the canonical Scriptures that were in reality the beating heart of the Christian tradition.

“How may I *inherit* eternal life?” asked the young

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# When “Justice” Replaces Christ: A Lutheran Response to Modern Social Theology

by [Mr. Paul Flemming](#), Fredericksburg, VA



Jeffrey Greene’s recent devotional on Mark 12:1 was thoughtful and helpful. It reminded me that everything we have belongs to God and that we are called to be faithful stewards. That is true and important. But it also helped clarify where much modern theology, especially within the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, has begun to drift away from the heart of the Gospel.

In Mark 12:1–12, Jesus tells the parable of the vineyard. A man plants a vineyard, builds it up, and entrusts it to tenants. When he sends servants to collect fruit, they are beaten and killed. Finally, he sends his son, and they kill him as well. Jesus is not primarily teaching about wealth or fairness. He is teaching about rejection, specifically, the rejection of God’s messengers and ultimately His Son.

The focus of this passage is clear: God is the owner, we are stewards, and humanity has failed. The problem is not that people failed to distribute resources equally. The problem is sin, rebellion against God and rejection of Christ.

This is where we must be careful. Much modern “social justice” theology shifts the focus away from sin and Christ and toward human systems and historical grievances. It often teaches that we must repent not only for our own sins but also for the actions of past generations. It suggests that justice requires correcting the past through social or economic means.

But Scripture does not teach this.

The Bible is clear that each person is responsible for his own sin. In Ezekiel 18:20, we read: “The soul who sins shall die. The son shall not suffer for the iniquity of the father, nor the father suffer for the iniquity of the son.” This means guilt is not passed down through history in a political or social sense.

We all share in original sin (Romans 5:12), but we are not held accountable for specific historical acts committed by others.

At the same time, Scripture also teaches that we are saved by grace alone. As it says in Ephesians 2:8–9, “For by grace you have been saved through faith... not a result of works, so that no one may boast.” This is the heart of Lutheran theology. We are not saved by what we do, whether that is moral effort, social activism, or attempts to correct past wrongs. We are saved by what Christ has done for us.

This is where the distinction between Law and Gospel becomes critical. The Law shows us our sin. It tells us what God requires and reveals that we fall short. As Romans 3:20 says, “Through the law comes knowledge of sin.” But the Law cannot save us. It can never be satisfied by our efforts.

This is what was rightly observed in the response to the devotional: no matter how much we do, it is never enough. We cannot give enough, repent enough, or fix enough to make ourselves right with God.

That is why we need the Gospel.

The Gospel is the good news that Christ has done what we could not do. He lived a perfect life, died for our sins, and rose again. His work is complete. As Jesus said on the cross, “It is finished” (John 19:30). There is nothing we can add to it.

This is also clearly taught in the Lutheran Confessions.

The Augsburg Confession states in Article IV: “Men cannot be justified before God by their own strength, merits, or works, but are freely justified for Christ’s sake, through faith.” This is not just one teaching among many—it is the center of the Christian faith.

Good works do have a place. Lutherans affirm that faith produces good works. As Martin Luther wrote, “Faith is a living, busy, active thing.” But these works flow from faith. They do not create it, and they do not save us.

This brings us back to the issue with modern social justice theology. When the Church begins to emphasize social or historical repentance as necessary

**[Jesus] is teaching about rejection, specifically, the rejection of God’s messengers and ultimately His Son.**

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## A New Milestone in the Clergy-Supply Crisis

by [Pr. Don Brandt](#), Director of Lutheran CORE's [Congregational Lay-Led Initiative \(CLI\)](#)

We have reached a new milestone when it comes to the median age of currently-serving Protestant pastors. It is now **sixty**. (I deliberately spelled out “sixty” in case any of you would have thought the number “60” was a typo.) This is the current estimate from author Thom Rainer, founder of Church Answers, an organization focusing on congregational revitalization and outreach. “Sixty.” Reflect on that for a moment. I consider this something of a milestone; and not in a good way.

I realize that my repeated articles regarding the clergy shortage are beginning to sound like a “broken record”; at least to those of you who are old enough to remember what “records” are. But I am becoming convinced that many denominational leaders, seminary staff, pastors nearing retirement, and congregational leaders are simply not paying attention when it comes to the gravity of this situation. Or perhaps they **do** understand the severity of this crisis but are hesitant to acknowledge it publicly. After all, none of us want to be labeled as “alarmists.” And then there *is* always the possibility that the world is about to end, so why worry? Anecdote: Survey results this last March of 3400 Americans indicate that one third of them believe the world will end in their lifetimes. The *New York Times* labels this a recent “mainstream apocalypse” world view.

Allow me to speculate on possible questions from those of you who might consider my concerns about the clergy supply situation “alarmist.”

1. “As a pastor who is still a few years from retirement, why should I be overly concerned regarding my congregation’s transition after I leave?” Answer: Because odds are your congregation will not be able to replace you, and might need to consider “raising up” the next pastor from among your active church members. And training, mentoring and educating (with online seminary courses) that prospective pastor will take years, not months.

2. “But why would it take years to replace me?” Answer: Because the current median age of serving pastors is **sixty**; in case you already forgot. And because twice as many Lutheran pastors retire each year as there are new seminary students graduating. To put it bluntly, this crisis is something that is beyond what denominational leaders can manage on their own. Not because they aren’t trying, but because this crisis is unprecedented. Unprecedented in my life-



time, and even unprecedented going back a century or more.

3. “As congregational lay-leaders why can’t our church manage even a long-term interim on our own? After all, we might be relatively small and have an older membership, but we are a strong fellowship of believers; both in terms of our commitment and our financial support.” Answer: Perhaps you can manage a two or three-year transitional interim, but what if it stretches to four or five years or more? Consider this September/2025 quote from Karl Vaters, a pastor and author who focuses on the challenges faced by smaller churches: **“Pastoral transitions are dangerous and traumatic times for churches...Other than the church planting phase, more churches close due to pastoral transition than for any other reason.”**

### One Current Example of a “Pastor-in-Training” Ministry Initiative

Here is one case of a church seeking to plan ahead when it comes to an upcoming pastoral transition. Not coincidentally, I happen to be a member of this congregation.

The dual-rostered (LCMC/NALC) congregation I attend is Our Savior’s Lutheran in Salem, Oregon. Our Savior’s (OSLC) is currently served by one full-time, lead pastor: Tom Hux. Pastor Hux has announced his plan to retire in four years; at the age of 65. Just this last April (2026) OSLC formally voted (overwhelmingly) to hire an active member—Greg—to join our congregation’s full-time ministry staff as a lay minister. His job description is to work three-quarters time to assist Pastor Hux in the area of pastoral care, teaching, worship leadership, and occasional preaching. However, one quarter of Greg’s full-time position will be devoted to taking online seminary courses; with the goal of eventually earning a Master of Divinity degree. The congregation’s hope and expectation is that, once he graduates with his Master of Divinity degree, Greg will then be for-

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## Video Ministries—May 2026

by [Pastor Dennis D. Nelson](#), Executive Director of Lutheran



“Your Devotional Journey *Through Scripture*: A Daily Discipleship Resource”

by Pastor Don Brandt

Many thanks to Doug Schoelles, NALC pastor and member of the board of Lutheran CORE, for his video review of Don Brandt’s new book. A link to Doug’s video can be found [HERE](#). A link to our You Tube channel, which contains sixty-seven reviews of books and videos on topics of interest and importance, can be found [HERE](#).

Doug writes -

I applaud Pastor Don Brandt for addressing a fundamental practice of growing in our faith: How do we study the Bible? As Lutherans with our mantra of Sola Scriptura we believe the Word of God is for all people. We also believe that God’s Word has something to say to every Christian every day.

But we know that building a consistent devotional pattern is difficult. We get distracted by the mundane, our busyness, and shiny electronic things. I commend Pastor Brandt for laying out a pattern to help people to begin to immerse themselves daily in the Word. *Your Devotional Journey* is a practical book to help a beginner become a pupil of scripture. The pattern that he gives is relatively simple. He gives advice on how to set yourself up for your quiet time in the Word. I do think he should have given a bigger emphasis to praying for the Holy Spirit to teach us. Only by the gift of the Spirit will the Word be revealed to us and our understanding be grounded in God.

**Read the day’s Bible passage.**

Pastor Brandt has selected passages of three to twelve verses from throughout the Bible. I would

even suggest they read the passage twice. The work he has done to select passages helps the pupil of the scripture to focus initially on important scripture passages. He has twice as many New Testament lessons as Old Testament passages. Again, this is a beginner’s book. A pupil of the scripture should cover all the scripture, Old and New Testament, over their years and decades.

**Copy 1 to 3 verses of the passage.**

We are encouraged to hide the Word in our hearts (Ps 119:11). One of the best ways to learn and memorize scripture is to copy it. Pastor Brandt asks the pupil to write down – copy - 1 to 3 verses of that passage to their prayer journal. This is a good practice. Another practice that could be encouraged is writing down key words or repeated words.

**Read Pastor Brandt’s brief reflection on the passage.**

The work he has done to give direction to the pupil of the Word by way of his written reflection and questions is very helpful. Reflection questions are helpful to guide meditation, going deeper, making personal. His reflections focus on the bondage of sin, the character and works of God, and applying the New Life in Christ.

**Write your personal reflections on the passage.**

We have read the scripture and even copied, so now what? How does the Word of God apply to my life? The act of writing down our meditation on the Word should lead us to listen for what the Holy Spirit is saying to us. How is the LORD applying this scripture passage to me, to my life, to my sin and to my need for salvation? So, again I applaud Pastor Brandt for encouraging this step.

**Write a prayer of gratitude to God based on the scripture passage.**

I was pleasantly surprised that his concluding devotional act was to reflect and write down a “thanksgiving to God.” Not just what you are thankful for, but to thank God for his work and word in your life. When we ponder the character and works of the LORD that bless our lives, then we will find our unshakeable joy in the LORD (Isa 58:14). This emphasis on gratitude can help the pupil of the scriptures to develop a hunger and thirst for God’s Word because they find something delicious to consume each time.

I commend Pastor Don Brandt’s “Your Devotional Journey Through Scripture” as a practicum that can help Christians to begin and establish a daily time in God’s Word.

## What's Next With the ELCA?

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Videos from the Lutheran Congregational Support Network showing the ELCA's Quest for Greater Control

An Analysis of Recommendations 1 and 7 from the Commission for a Renewed Lutheran Church

We then conclude with a Review and Analysis of the 2025 Churchwide Assembly and information showing how the organizers of the triennial ELCA youth gatherings are working relentlessly to groom ELCA youth in LGBTQIA+, transgender, and non-binary ideology.

The ELCA Constitution requires the Church Council to inform synods of recommendations it will be bringing to the Churchwide Assembly six months prior to the Assembly. So I do not know how much we will know about the 2028 Assembly before early 2028. During the three years prior to the 2025 Assembly I was struck with how little we were informed regarding the work of the Commission for a Renewed Lutheran Church. They were amazingly non-communicative and non-specific in the written summaries of their meetings. So I am not hopeful regarding how much we will know about what will be coming to the 2028 Assembly until six months before the Assembly.

The 2025 Assembly did not go as far as many feared it might go in terms of remaking the ELCA. The 2028 Assembly might be the time when that happens. As we become aware of anything specific, we will keep you informed.

Will the provision for bound conscience be eliminated? Will the ELCA say that there is no place for traditional views on marriage and human sexuality and those who hold them?

What will be the recommendation of the Secretary of the ELCA regarding the motion for a revised process for the fast-tracking of constitutional amendments that come from the floor?

Will those who are determined to make DEIA mandatory for congregations prevail?

What will be the shape of and what will come from the "mutual accountability measures and compliance incentives" that are being developed to make dismantling racism central in all parts of the ELCA?

Will the authority of the Bible, the Great Commission, and the Gospel of the forgiveness of sins through faith in the risen Christ have any place in the ELCA?

We will keep you posted.

## The Lord's Inheritance

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rich man of Jesus. As modern scholarship has clearly shown, the Jews of Jesus's day did not feel *burdened* by the Law, not desperate to "earn their salvation" by their obedience to it—that was the peculiar pathology of the Roman Catholicism Luther later encountered. No, the Jews of Jesus's time viewed the salvation of the Lord and the means by which they received it (by definition, means of grace) as a precious *inheritance* to be received from God through their forebears.

Wise Christians should do the same. A principle of the medieval theology from which Lutheranism sprang was that we—whoever and whenever "we" happen to be—are "dwarves standing upon the shoulders of giants." While certainly they were sinners who got some things wrong and whose ideas would consequentially need to be corrected by consulting "the sources" of the Christian tradition (preeminently the Scriptures) just as our descendants will need to correct us, what they passed faithfully far surpassed the mistakes they made.

While he ended his life in Orthodoxy, Church historian Jaroslav Pelikan was a Lutheran when he penned his most famous line; "Tradition is the living faith of the dead. *Traditionalism* is the dead faith of the living." Lutherans should embrace the tradition of which we are a part and honor the theology—and practices—of our forebears in more than words, by *inhabiting* them, *practicing* them, and making them our own.

There is more to be said about how traditional congregations (and the kind of people who probably read the Lutheran CORE newsletter) can lean into the evangelism opportunities of this historical moment by "living out loud" as who they actually are, but for now, the chief thing is to remember that at its heart, the Lutheran Reformation is not against the Christian tradition, but receives it as the Lord's inheritance to His people.

## A New Milestone ... Crisis

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mally called to serve OSLC as an ordained pastor

So what led OSLC to this point? These seven developments:

a) In June of 2023 OSLC's full-time Associate Pastor resigned after serving five years. This was the beginning of OSLC's pastoral vacancy.

b) In March of 2024 a call committee was organized to launch a search for a new ordained pastor to serve with Pastor Hux.

c) After a two-year unsuccessful search process, the call committee endorsed—unanimously—a proposal to begin a “pastor-in-training” strategy in an effort to identify and enlist an active lay leader to join OSLC's ministry staff and—simultaneously—begin an online seminary education.

d) At a special congregational meeting in the fall of 2025 the decision was made to support the formation of a “Pastor-in-Training” team to begin working on pursuing this new ministry strategy. At this point the call committee would still continue to meet, and OSLC continued to list its pastoral vacancy.

f) In March of this year (2026) a second, special congregational meeting was announced and scheduled (for April 12<sup>th</sup>) to vote on hiring our recruit Greg, an active member, as our new lay minister and pastor-in-training. This upcoming congregational meeting would also be when the call committee—at least temporarily—would disband, and when OSLC's pastoral vacancy would no longer be posted.

g) One month prior to this upcoming special congregational meeting a Sunday forum was held to introduce Greg to the membership; and to explain the agenda for the congregational meeting. Over 150 members attended this forum.

h) The official congregational meeting (and vote) was held on April 12<sup>th</sup> of this year. Greg spoke to those in attendance prior to the motion and vote. The vote outcome—by written ballot—was just over 98% in favor of hiring Greg as part of our “pastor-in-training” strategy.

This is, of course, just one congregation's “journey”; a journey that will be playing out over the next few years. However, I share these details to make a point: **Given the current clergy shortage, churches need to be—more than ever—engaged in advanced planning related to their pastoral transitions.** For Lutheran congregations this is in part about taking the New Testament (and Martin Luther) seriously when it comes to the “priesthood” we all—clergy and laity alike—share as Christ followers.

This clergy shortage will not, in my opinion, be “fixed” in the foreseeable future. As a result, many congregations will need to organize to be effectively lay-led for the years it will take while one of their active members is educated (online), trained, and mentored for ordained ministry. This is especially true for smaller churches; but will also be the future faced by many mid-sized and larger congregations.

However, on a less-bleak “note”: We want to keep some historical perspective here. The first and second century church not only survived but thrived in a Roman Empire that was not only pagan, but was openly persecuting the Body of Christ. And that persecution began, needless to say, long before there were seminary-trained clergy available for call. So we must not forget that, for most of today's churches, their strength and institutional viability has been built on the commitment of their active members even more than their serving pastors. And let's never forget that the local church, when well-led, and guided by the Holy Spirit, is still an incredibly effective means of witnessing to the love and mercy of Jesus Christ.

Finally, the details of how a congregation faces the challenge of a major pastoral transition can be incredibly complex. There's nothing “easy” about this. As a result, the best way to address this challenge always needs to be a strategy customized for the unique characteristics, strengths and mission of each individual congregation. But perhaps you're not even sure how to begin when it comes to facing this challenge; whether your time of transition is already happening, or it will be sometime within the next few years. If that describes what your church is facing, Lutheran CORE's [Congregations in Transition](#) and [Congregational Lay-leadership Initiative](#) ministries are available to assist you.

One last thought for you to reflect on: **Whenever congregations are about to face a major leadership transition, it is essential that church lay leaders and pastors *plan in advance* to address this challenge.** Let me be of assistance. Details for both the [CiT](#) and [CLI](#) ministries are available on the Lutheran CORE website.

If you have any questions you can always email me at [pastordonbrandt@gmail.com](mailto:pastordonbrandt@gmail.com).

## When “Justice” Replaces Christ (continued)

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for righteousness, it risks turning good works into a new form of law. It places burdens on people that Scripture does not place. It binds consciences where God has left them free.

This does not mean that Christians should ignore injustice or fail to love their neighbors. On the contrary, we are called to serve others in love. But we do so as those who are already forgiven and free in Christ, not as those trying to earn forgiveness or correct history.

History itself is complex. Human beings have moved, settled, and fought over land for thousands of years. No group is without fault. But more importantly, Scripture does not call us to resolve all historical wrongs. It calls us to repent of our own sins and trust in Christ.

God is still at work in the world, even through flawed people and nations. As Romans 8:28 reminds us, “God works all things together for good for those who love Him.” This does not justify sin, but it does remind us that God’s purposes are greater than

human history.

In the end, the Church must remain focused on its true mission: proclaiming Christ crucified and risen for the forgiveness of sins. When it shifts that focus to political or social agendas, it loses its center.

The answer is not found in human systems or ideologies. The answer is found in Christ alone. In Him, we have forgiveness, life, and salvation.

*In Christ,*

**Paul Flemming**

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## Coming Events

**CORE Voice Newsletter**  
**Published by Lutheran CORE;**  
*Kim Smith, Editor*

**To contact Lutheran CORE, please email**  
**lcorewebmail@gmail.com or**  
**call 1-888-810-4180**

- **NALC Continental Youth Gathering 2026**, Roanoke, VA, July 7-10, 2026. Registration is closed. Click [here](#).
- **LCMC 26th Annual Gathering & Convention**. Lutheran Church of Hope, West Des Moines, IA, October 4-7, 2026. Registration deadline is September 10th. Click [here](#).