Lutheran Coalition for Renewal
CORE Voice
A Voice and Network for Confessing Lutherans
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# More Evidence That the End Result is Pre-Determined: An Analysis of the ELCA's "Learn and Discern" Series

*by Pastor Dennis D. Nelson, Executive Director of Lutheran CORE (ELCA)*



**HERE** is a link to a series of five podcasts which the ELCA describes as "an educational tool . . . as we journey together through the reconsideration of the social statement *'Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust.'*" The ELCA very much wants those with traditional views to believe that their firmly held convictions do matter, that their voices will be heard, and that they and their views will be treated with profound dignity and respect. But no matter how hard they may try, the ELCA cannot build a convincing case that the end result is not pre-determined and they cannot cover over the multitude of ways in which the ELCA has shown through its actions and behavior over the years that traditional views and those who hold them come in a distant second.

One of the presenters in the fourth podcast said, "The church's unity is grounded not in agreement on every issue, but in the Gospel of Jesus Christ and shared belief in God's grace." But I do not believe that the ELCA is in agreement on the Gospel, even though everyone uses that term. I do not agree with those in the church--even leaders in

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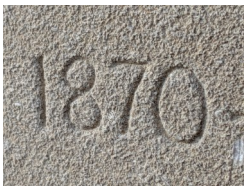
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# Your Father's Place on the Mother Road Is No More

*by Rev. Keith Forni, STS, Church Planter / Pastor of Cristo Rey Lutheran Church, Joliet, IL (NALC)*



156 years of continuous Word and Sacrament ministry came to an abrupt end on September 13, 2026. That's the day of the final Sunday liturgy at First and Santa Cruz Lutheran Church in the heart of Illinois' fourth largest city, Joliet. Founded in 1870 by German Lutheran immigrants, Die Erste Evangelische Luteranische Kirche, First Lutheran welcomed Iglesia Luterana Santa Cruz as onsite ministry partners in 2005. The two congregations grew into what could be called the Joliet City Center Lutheran Parish, jointly offering Christian education, worship in both English and Spanish, a food pantry and other community programs.




The property's new owner is a downtown developer. His intentions for its use are not fully known, but he clearly is retaining it for commercial purposes, implementing needed repairs. One of the first acts was to remove the Cross which stood atop the steeple since a 1962 renovation.

I retired from this ELCA urban parish in 2021 after thirty years of bilingual ministry in Joliet (plus ten prior in Chicago), having been called as the Mission Developer / church planter for Santa Cruz in 1991 and later, pastor to the yoked parish. The congregation conferred the title of Pastor Emeritus to me shortly thereafter. Subsequently, the area synod in Northern Illinois attempted but could not secure an ongoing bilingual interim pastor. Offers to fortify the Spanish language dimension of life at FSCLC were rebuffed. Hispanic-Latino Lutherans who called First Santa Cruz home faded away. Except for the weekly food pantry, many community connections dissipated. Once bustling Sunday School and catechism classes are no more.



Ironically, the closure of FSCLC comes just as downtown Joliet is entering a long awaited resurgence. New life is pulsing through the area, thanks to the completion of a celebrated City Center Square, a Joliet Junior College Culinary Arts campus building, county courthouse, and growing number of shops and restaurants. The Joliet Latino population continues to grow exponentially.

Sadly, the closing and sale of the First Santa Cruz property, effected by a small council remnant and synod officials living two hours away, took place in the midst of the Route 66 Centennial Year Celebration. The famed "Mother Road" runs right in front of the historic church site at North Ottawa (Rt 66) and West Benton Street. Thousands of vehicles – autos. vans, buses and motorcycle brigades – many from other countries – will pass by this year. What lost opportunities.




The final service took place on the eve of Holy

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# Defining Following Jesus (Part One)

*by Pastor John Mohan, NALC pastor of St. Luke Lutheran Church, Bloomsburg, PA, and board member of Lutheran CORE*

*This is the first article in a series that explores Lutheran CORE's development of renewal resources that fit within a Lutheran context. We begin by defining discipleship.*

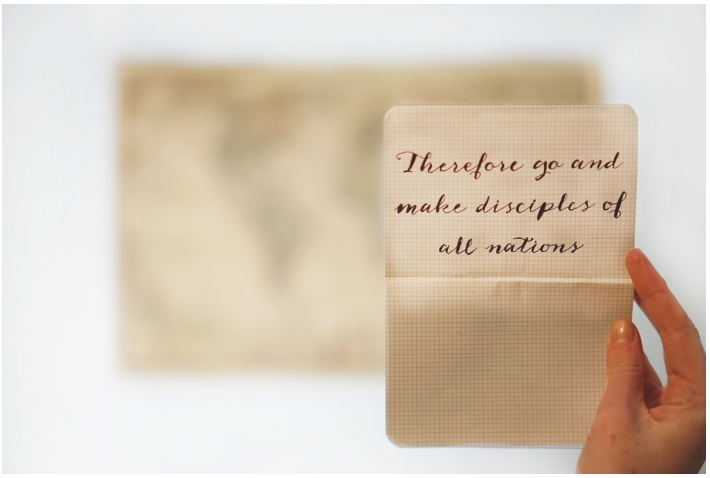
This past September, the Lutheran CORE Board of Directors met in Carefree, Arizona, to discuss one of the most pressing issues congregations face today: How do we make disciples? It seems like a simple question until put into practice.

The Bible speaks of disciples (*mathētēs,* meaning learner or apprentice) hundreds of times, but only four times does it talk about "being a disciple," and only once do we have a verse (Matthew 28:19) that commands us to "make disciples." With so few biblical references about making disciples, there is an astonishing number of ways people describe the process, and not all of them are helpful.

Shortly after I was ordained, discipleship became a focus for me. I'm not exactly sure how it happened, but Jesus led me down that path. Over the course of 30 years, I served three congregations that placed discipleship among their top priorities. Their priorities helped confirm the Holy Spirit's call for me to serve them, yet, I am embarrassed to say, all three congregations struggled to make disciples because they could not agree on what discipleship means. There was something missing either in my leadership or the congregation's Lutheran identity. We will never know how to make a disciple if we don't know what discipleship means.

Early in my ministry, I was taught that congregational life can be simply divided into two areas: evangelism and discipleship. Evangelism was everything that a congregation did to introduce people to Jesus Christ. Discipleship was everything a congregation did to deepen a person's relationship to Jesus Christ. This definition proved to be a good starting point, but it subordinates worship and leaves discipleship too broadly defined.

As I continued working within congregational ministry, I soon discovered many people within the congregations I served who defined discipleship in terms of church participation. They measured discipleship by how often a person worshiped, how many Bible studies they attended, and how much they gave to support the congregation. While important, these metrics identify levels of faithfulness within the life of the church while ignoring the world completely.




And then, of course, working on discipleship automatically exposes you to many non-Lutheran voices. American Evangelicalism dominates many of the discipleship conversations. Among those voices, discipleship becomes our work and a way in which we receive God's approval. For me, this dynamic was paralyzing as I worried how Lutherans could faithfully make disciples without losing the Gospel.

The way in which you approach discipleship will also lead to differences in definitions. I learned that a traditional Lutheran defines discipleship as living out the faith through Word and Sacrament. Others will think of it through the lens of education, mission, spiritual formation or social justice. Without a shared definition of discipleship, a congregation won't be able to settle into a recognizable process.

I won't present myself as some kind of expert on discipleship because I'm still learning how to be one. On the last morning of the board retreat, after discussing at length how to develop resources in line with the "renewal" part of our name, I took time to walk the labyrinth at Spirit in the Desert. It helped me gather my thoughts. Readers unfamiliar with labyrinths need to know they are not mazes. They don't offer multiple paths from which we choose. There is only one path that enters the labyrinth and leads to the center. Once at the center, a person rests by the Cross and then retraces their path out of the labyrinth back into the world.

The Pilgrim's Prayer said upon entering the labyrinth serves us well as we begin wrestling with discipleship: "Lord, as I enter this labyrinth, take from me my distractions and burdens. Guide my feet along this winding path. As I journey toward the center, draw me closer to Your heart. As I rest at the center, fill me with Your peace. And as I walk back out into the world, grant me the strength to live Your love. Amen."

# Considering Congregational Leadership Transitions: From Lay Ministers to "Pastors-in-Training"

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



Lutheran CORE's **Congregational Lay-leadership Initiative (CLI)** has been designed and launched to help congregations "raise-up" from among their active members one or more lay ministers willing to accept a public ministry role in the life of their congregation.

Why is this kind of ministry initiative so important? For two reasons:

1. First, because Protestant denominations in general—including Lutheran church bodies—face a severe and growing shortage of ordained pastors available and willing to relocate for a new call.

2. And second, because many LCMC, NALC and ELCA call committees are growing frustrated and demoralized in their prolonged and often unsuccessful search to identify, call and install a new pastor willing to relocate to serve their congregations.

While I have addressed this ministry challenge in previous CORE newsletter articles, the occasion for this article is that I have written a workbook to assist congregational leaders who are now, or in the near future will be, facing a pastoral vacancy. This workbook, which is to be published by Sola Publishing, will be available within the next few months. In this workbook I will offer step-by-step practical strategies for addressing church leadership transition challenges. Furthermore, these recommended strategies are based on a truly biblical understanding of Christian leadership. More on the content of the upcoming workbook toward the end of this article.

My impression is that many Lutherans, despite our historical roots as advocates for the centrality of Scripture, have forgotten the Apostle Paul's understanding of Christian leadership. For Paul, leadership in the first century church was based primarily on lay leadership. Granted, his epistles were written to local faith communities before there were any "ordained clergy." However, churches today will need to take a closer look at Paul's emphasis on lay ministers, a resource which is becoming just as relevant today as it was in the first century. Why is that? Because we are now living in an era when many congregations with a pastoral vacancy can no longer assume they will be able to find an ordained member of the clergy to serve their church.

Paul's understanding of Christian leadership within local faith communities was based to a large degree on his conviction that leaders should have one or more ministry gifts of the Holy Spirit. And these ministry gifts—needless to say—did not depend on such leaders holding a particular clerical office or earning an academic degree. (For a quick refresher course on Paul's views we need only read Ephesians chapter four, First Corinthians chapters twelve to fourteen, and Romans chapter twelve.)

It's definitely time—given the growing shortage of pastors available for call—for more congregational councils, transitions teams, and/or call committees to begin considering this question:

Does their congregation have one, two or three active members who might be willing to seriously consider part-time vocational ministry. And if so, would they be willing to serve their own congregation as lay ministers? Also, would perhaps one of these recruited lay ministers, at some point in the near future, be willing to consider taking online seminary courses? (Paid for by the congregation, of course.) In other words, become a "pastor-in-training."

While I have not been able to find even one published book that deals in depth with the focus of my upcoming Sola workbook, there are recognized Protestant church leaders who are beginning to warn of the full implications of the current and growing shortage of pastors. For example, published author and church consultant Carey Nieuwhof recently said the following on a podcast: "If you are one of the hundreds of thousands of churches that will be looking for a new pastor in the next decade, the time to start planning for succession is now. Mostly, that will involve enlisting leaders from within your congregation, and hiring them to fill pastoral vacancies." Perhaps "hundreds of thousands" of Protestant churches sounds like hyperbole to some readers. Nevertheless, I am convinced that far too many Lutheran churches have simply not given this

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# From Fear to Faith: Loving Our Muslim Neighbors as Christ Commanded

*by Mr. Paul Flemming, Fredericksburg, VA*

In an earlier article, I wrote about restoring Christian teaching within the home, a responsibility Martin Luther emphasized in his *Small Catechism*. Parents are called not only to teach their children about God but also to demonstrate what Christian living looks like. Recently, I have been considering how that responsibility extends beyond our homes to those who do not share our faith, particularly Muslims.

Today, fear and suspicion often surround Islam. Some concerns arise from real events, including persecution, terrorism, and violence committed in the name of Islam. Christians should not ignore these realities or pretend that Christianity and Islam teach the same things.

Yet I have begun to ask whether fear has too often shaped our response. Are we approaching Muslims primarily as people to fear, or as neighbors whom Christ commands us to love?

### Christ's Command to Love

In Matthew 5:44, Jesus commands us to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us. This is not conditional upon how others treat us. It is our Lord's command.

Muslims are not a single, uniform community. Like Christians, they represent different cultures, convictions, and interpretations of their faith. To judge an individual Muslim solely by the actions of extremists is neither reasonable nor consistent with Christian love.

More importantly, every Muslim is a human being created by God, someone for whom Christ died.

This does not mean compromising our confession. Lutheran Christianity teaches that salvation comes through Jesus Christ alone. We must not abandon this truth to avoid disagreement. But we are called to proclaim it in love, not hostility.

### Does God Need Our Protection?

In 2 Samuel 6:6–7, Uzzah reached out to steady the Ark of the Covenant when the oxen stumbled. God struck him dead. Uzzah's intentions may have seemed understandable, but his action violated God's instructions concerning the Ark.

This passage reminds us that honorable intentions do not justify disobeying God's commands. It also raises an uncomfortable question: Have Christians



sometimes convinced themselves that they must defend God, even when their methods contradict His Word?

There was a time when I believed defending the Church might require force. I now see the need to distinguish between protecting innocent people from violence and attempting to defend Christ through coercion.

God does not depend upon our strength to preserve His Church. Jesus promises in Matthew 16:18 that the gates of hell will not prevail against it. This does not mean Christians will avoid suffering, but it assures us that the Church's future rests with Christ.

### The Church and the Sword

Lutheran theology distinguishes between the responsibilities of the Church and those of civil government. Article XVI of the Augsburg Confession recognizes the legitimacy of civil authority, including its responsibility to maintain order and protect the innocent.

Christians may therefore support lawful measures against terrorism and persecution without treating Muslims collectively as enemies.

**We do not need to defend Christ from Muslims. We need to demonstrate Christ to Muslims.**

The Church, however, has a different calling: to proclaim the Gospel, administer the Sacraments, teach God's Word, and demonstrate Christ's love.

The sword may restrain evil, but it cannot create faith. As Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 3:6–7, we may plant and water, but God gives the growth. Faith is created by the Holy Spirit through the Gospel, not through intimidation or force.

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# My First Steps Into Ordained Ministry

*by Pr. Ethan Zimmerman, Christ the King Lutheran Church, Newcastle, Wyoming, NALC*



Greenhorn, Rookie, Novice, Newcomer, Wet-Behind-The-Ears, Newbie, and last but not least… Pastor! On July 18th I was ordained at my home congregation, Trinity Lutheran Church, in Jeromesville, Ohio and on August 23rd I preached my first sermon and presided over communion at Christ the King Lutheran Church in Newcastle, Wyoming, my first call as a pastor! The last 8 years have been leading up to this moment, from studying at the Religion department at Ohio Northern University where I got my Bachelor of Arts to the three years at the North American Lutheran Seminary in Ambridge, PA, to being the understudy to the Rev. Eric Waters and the Rev. Rob Weber as the Vicar at St. John Lutheran Church in Boerne, Texas for a year after graduation. For years people asked, "Where are you in your studies?" and "When will you be — ordained?" As time went on my answers to those questions changed as I made progress toward my goal of getting my MDiv and being ordained, and finally, the end has come and I have crossed over into a new beginning!

With so many years being a college student, seminarian, and vicar, I was used to following around my supervisors, watching them handle various issues and taking mental notes on what to do or not to do in certain situations. Now, after being prepared, examined, and ordained into Christ's Church, I have been sent out to pastor a church without a supervisor down the hall to fall back on and direct questions to. I am that guy! At first the thought of being "the guy" scared me, but I was reminded of what God said to Moses in Exodus 4:11-12,

"Then the Lord said to him, 'Who has made man's mouth? Who makes him mute, or deaf, or seeing, or blind? Is it not I, the Lord? Now therefore go, and I will be with your mouth and teach you what you shall speak.'"

It is a comfort beyond reason, a peace beyond understanding, to know and trust that the Lord has gone before me, walks beside me, and stands behind me in everything I do, but particularly as I lead Christ the King as their pastor. Growing up in my grandfather's house and watching him pastor my home congregation, I knew from a young age that it is serious business, that it is not a "job" that simply deals with numbers or moving product, but is the shepherding of souls, and that is not something to be trifled with. When I think about this, I am sometimes assailed by doubts and think, "Lord! Why me? Anyone else could have been better!" Again, He who has made my mouth and my eyes says to me to the words of 2 Corinthians 12:9,

"My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."

As I have been at Christ the King these last few weeks, I have leaned into my weakness and into the strength Christ gives, letting Him guide me into places unknown. Being a native of Ohio, moving to Wyoming and entering into a small community was intimidating at first. I soon learned that it is a welcoming community and one that hungers for the gospel and the love of Jesus Christ. Everything that I have learned over the last 8 years, from the expert theological education under Dr. Luy and Dr. Pierce at the NALS to being mentored by the masters of leadership, the Rev. Eric Waters and Rev. Rob Weber, has come to this point, has come to form me into the pastor that I am today. I may be a greenhorn and wet-behind-the-ears compared to many who are in ministry today, but in spite of my inexperience at being "the guy," the Lord has and will guide me to shepherd His flock.

I am convinced that if the Lord has taken me this far, there is nothing He can't overcome and there is no person whom He can't guide. If you are wondering why you have been chosen to do what you are doing, asking the question, "Why me?"—keep trusting, keep praying, and lean into your weakness, trusting that the Lord will accomplish through you what He has purposed, for His power is made perfect in weakness. Amen!

## More Evidence ...

*Continued from page 1*

the church—who reject the teaching that Jesus died for our sins. Instead they believe that Jesus was crucified because He was a threat to the oppressive political power structures of His day and now we need to join with Him in working to dismantle the oppressive political power structures of our day. And I find many in the ELCA not wanting to help people experience God's grace but instead wanting to coerce them into endless groveling, repenting, and confessing of their racism, white supremacy, male dominance, sexism, patriarchalism, homophobia, transphobia, and Islamophobia.

Several of the presenters spoke of "where the Spirit is leading us" (which they see as in sharp contrast with "the way the world is dividing us.") They also spoke of the need to "move further into where the Spirit is calling us." The problem with that language is the implication that anyone who disagrees with the end result is not listening to and is even resisting the Spirit. Dr. Roger Willer is the recently retired Director of Theological Ethics for ELCA Churchwide. In the first podcast he said, "The Spirit does new things." He then added that the church should not change "just because culture changes." But is it not interesting that the ELCA is changing in the same way and at the same time as culture changes? Dr. Timothy Wengert, professor emeritus at United Lutheran Seminary in Philadelphia, was a member of the 2009 task force. It was under his influence that the whole concept of bound conscience was introduced into the 2009 social statement. He makes the comment in the third podcast that he was opposed to the changes when they were introduced in the 1990's statement. But talking with several LGBTQ seminary students led him to change his mind. The implication is that those with traditional views would also change their minds if they were to have enough open, caring, and compassionate conversations with LGBTQ persons.

One of the presenters in the fourth podcast emphasized the need for "mutual understanding" and "remaining in relationship despite differences." This person saw this whole process as "ultimately calling the church to engage in conversation with compassion and a commitment to the well-being of the whole body of Christ." But is that the way the ELCA is behaving? I would say absolutely not. Here are several compelling counterarguments.

1.

Even though the task force claims that the changes made as part of the first reconsideration process were "simply editorial," what they amounted to was nothing less than a full embrace of every form of sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender preference.

2.

The ELCA Church Council passed several Continuing Resolutions prior to the 2025 Churchwide Assembly, which made every form of sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender preference part of a special group of privileged people who will be empowered beyond their numbers because they are seen as "historically marginalized persons." These Continuing Resolutions have become part of the governing documents of the church even though they were never approved by a Churchwide Assembly and even though most people do not know anything about them.

3.

ELCA youth gatherings have become grooming events for LGBTQ and non-binary ideology. They would never have a speaker who advocates for traditional views. Instead—

- In 2018 Nadia Bolz-Weber led 30,000 young people in a chant rejecting traditional views as a lie from Satan and a pre-adolescent, transgender child was featured on stage.
- In 2024 Keynote speaker Keats Miles-Wallace promoted transgender ideology, and a film based on the creation account in Genesis 1-2 promoted non-binary ideology.
- I believe that until the ELCA apologizes for and distances itself from what Nadia Bolz-Weber said and did at the 2018 youth gathering, any talk on the part of the ELCA of honoring and treating with a high level of dignity and respect those with traditional views has absolutely no credibility.

4.

I wrote to Imran Siddiqui, vice president of the ELCA and chairperson of the Church Council, when

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## More Evidence ...

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I read that ReconcilingWorks had been given a voice but no vote position on the Church Council. I asked if the same kind of position would be given to an organization with traditional views. He wrote back, saying that ReconcilingWorks had historically been marginalized. I then asked, What about people who are currently marginalized, like those with traditional views? He did not respond. I did not feel that I had been listened to, heard, and treated with profound respect.

The ELCA has a long way to go if it wants people with traditional views to believe that it is trying to do more than just damage control—get through this process with as few losses as possible. It has a long way to go to build a convincing case that the end result is not pre-determined, all views are valued and will be heard, and that people with traditional views will be treated with profound respect.

## Clergy Connect: Resource for Congregations Looking for a Pastor Or Other Staff Member

*Pastor Dennis D. Nelson, Executive Director of Lutheran CORE (ELCA)*

**HERE** is a link to the Clergy Connect page on our website. That is a resource for congregations looking for a pastor or other staff member. If we can be of help posting your position, please prepare a listing and then send it to lcorewebmail@gmail.com. Listings should be updated every six months. Vacancies 18 months and older will be deleted. Please email us at the same address when a position is filled. May the Lord bless, guide, and provide for you in your search.



## From Fear to Faith...

*Continued from page 5*

### From Fear to Opportunity

What are we teaching our children when we speak about Muslims? Are we teaching them to recognize real dangers while loving their neighbors, or allowing fear to shape their understanding of an entire religious community?

If we teach our children that Christ commands love, forgiveness, and compassion, we must demonstrate those qualities ourselves.

A Muslim neighbor should not be regarded first as a threat or merely as a potential convert, but as a fellow human being deserving kindness, dignity, and love.

Such love does not require silence about Christ. Rather, it provides opportunities to share the Gospel through friendship, compassion, service, and honest conversations about faith.

### Trusting Christ

The Church does not belong to us. It belongs to Jesus Christ. We are entrusted with proclaiming His Word, not guaranteeing His victory. That victory is already His.

This does not remove our responsibility to protect those in danger. But legitimate concerns must never become excuses for abandoning Christ's command to love.

We do not need to defend Christ from Muslims. We need to demonstrate Christ to Muslims. We love our Muslim neighbors not merely because they might become Christians, but because Christ first loved us.

In a world divided by fear, perhaps our greatest witness is a Church that refuses to surrender either truth or love.

**We are called to be faithful. The outcome belongs to God.**

**Aim your phone's camera at the QR code to the right to bring up the link to Lutheran CORE's website. ==>**

## Your Father's Place on the Mother Road ...

*Continued from page 2*

Cross Day – Dia de la Santa Cruz—the "parish name day" for the bilingual faith community. Throughout the thirty-five years of the Santa Cruz ministry, this was a day for joyous worship, celebrating *fe, familia y fiesta.* Not so, now. It was hard to hide the grief and sadness of the occasion. Opportunity for food & table talk was offered to the seventy or so present.

Absent was any recognition of the immigrant past, their sacrificial giving that built the structure, the rich history of parish ministry stretching into a third century, the pastors and lay leaders who were so vital to ongoing congregational life and service. As it turned out, I saw no other former pastors present. None were named, not even the longest tenured cleric, +The Rev. Dr. John Goeken, of blessed memory, who served from 1924 - 1966. I came prepared to share brief remarks, but I was not called upon.



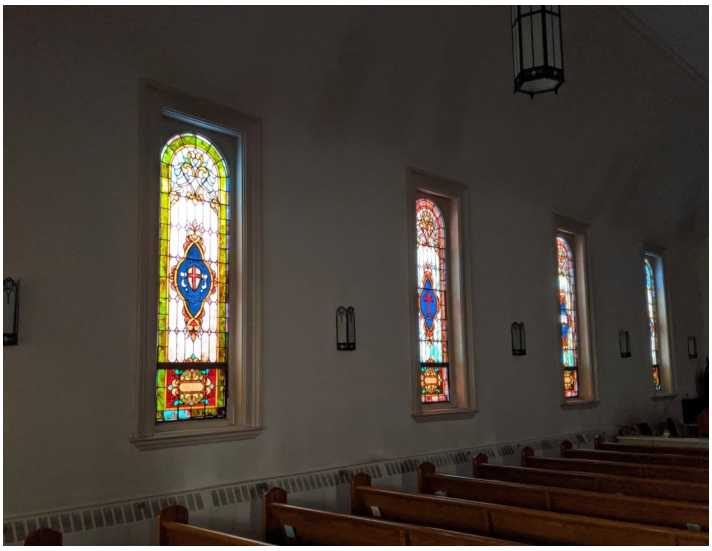
Underscoring the troubling ministry shut-down was the fact that on this very day, the City of Joliet was hosting a vibrant Fiesta en la Plaza—the inaugural edition of the annual celebration to be held in the new City Square – just five blocks from the FSCLC building. In the past, FSCLC hosted hospitality & craft tables at this street festival, coinciding with Hispanic Heritage Month. This year: a lost ministry opportunity.

It was truly perplexing to witness the parish closing—especially given the ELCA's prioritizing racially inclusive ministry. Santa Cruz had been the premier Spanish language ministry in the Northern Illinois Synod. Its influence was significant: initiating and supporting a network of fifteen or more participating congregations in an annual celebration of Las Posadas, helping to draft a synodical Latino ministry strategy, hosting the Bilingual Ministry Resource Center and contributing to a "Five Church Process" for Joliet area ELCA congregation—advancing a vision for inter-parochial witness and service. (Three of those five are now closed, a fourth has a very limited future horizon.)

Most notable was the Santa Cruz co-sponsorship with Lutheran CORE of an annual Inter-Lutheran Hispanic-Latino Ministry Encuentro (Encounter)—a multi-day gathering of ministry practitioners – both lay and clergy—theologians, seminarians and others drawn from various Lutheran church bodies, from the midwest and beyond. ELCA synodical support of this unique resource event was tepid—demonstrating reluctance to offer positive regard for a Lutheran CORE affiliated gathering.

Does what is described here illustrate the impending "tsunami of church closings" highlighted in a recent PBS documentary, *Christianity at a Crossroads*? In that program, a forecast is made that 100,000 churches will be closed or repurposed in the next decade. (Since the 1990s, First and Santa Cruz is the sixth church in downtown Joliet to be sold or repurposed.) Even so, the ageless Gospel of Jesus Christ is to be proclaimed to all nations, in the context of varied cultures and idioms. Matthew 28 (the Great Commission) and 9:38 point the way: "Pray therefore the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest."

*The Rev. Keith L. Forni, STS, serves in retirement as Church Planter / Pastor of Cristo Rey Lutheran Church, in Joliet IL - a parish of the North American Lutheran Church, est. 2023.*



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

## Considering Congregational Leadership Transitions ...

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ministry challenge the attention it deserves.

My upcoming workbook will be describing the following steps for congregational leaders to seriously consider and then pursue:

1. The congregational council, transition team, and/or call committee meets to begin discussing not just the short-term, but long-term leadership (whether ordained or lay) needs of their church. This discussion is especially important for churches already dealing with a pastoral vacancy. However, it is also a necessary topic of conversation for churches where their resident pastor is approaching retirement age. In other words, when it's "only a matter of time" before they will have a pastoral vacancy. (And keep in mind that the median age of serving Protestant pastors in the U.S. is now, as of 2026, estimated to be sixty!)

2. A second, but essential part of this discussion is that it be undergirded by prayer. Not just group prayers, but individual, daily prayers by each person who is a part of this group of leaders. Without this constancy and discipline of prayer there will rarely be the assurance that their discussions and decisions have been inspired and guided by the Holy Spirit.

3. Before looking at the more practical tasks before them, church leaders will take time for Bible studies focusing on Paul's understanding of Christian leadership in his epistles. They will also look at Martin Luther's understanding of the "priesthood" as a ministry that includes the laity.

4. The next step is for these leaders to engage in a process to reach a consensus regarding which one, two or three active members should be approached and asked whether they would consider serving—in a part-time vocational role—as a lay minister. And the criterion for which members to approach? It should primarily be based on the ministry gifts this person has already displayed, as a volunteer and leader, in the life and ministry of the congregation.

So what are you asking these potential "ministers" to seriously consider? This is primarily about their taking a more public role as lay ministers serving your church. Doing what exactly? That depends on their ministry gifts/skills/talents, and on what they can offer to address the ministry needs of your congregation. It will also depend on their time availability; which might be only ten hours a week or less. In other words, their ministry would most likely be bi-vocational and part-time. Ideally, this should not only be a very public ministry role, but one where they are compensated for their time. "On staff", as it were. This will, in my opinion, increase the odds that one of your lay ministers might seriously consider, in the future, taking some seminary courses online. Also, being a salaried lay minister increases the likelihood that your members understand the importance of the role this person is taking in your congregation's life and ministry.

This article cannot even begin to give you a complete summary of my upcoming workbook. However, allow me to add a few more details regarding the workbook's content. This workbook is ideally written for a discussion-oriented group of between four and ten congregational leaders. And since group discussions are so crucial to this process, each chapter in the book will include discussion questions that help guide and focus these conversations. The workbook will also address some practical "nuts and bolts" in this process; including writing job contracts for lay ministers, securing necessary congregational approval, securing any financial support that might be needed, and celebrating the beginning of your lay minister's ministry with a laying on of hands commissioning during Sunday worship.

Finally, if your congregation is already dealing with a vacancy, and you have specific and urgent challenges you would like assistance with, you might want to consider CORE's Congregational Layleadership Initiative. Details regarding this coaching assistance can be found on the CORE website.

Or if you have specific questions you can email me directly at pastordonbrandt@gmail.com.

## Coming Events

- **Pro Ecclesia Conference** Birmingham, Alabama, Jan 11-13, 2027. Click here to register
- **NALC Clergy Retreat,** San Antonio, TX, January 22, 2027. Click here.
- **BYLD High School Leadership Gathering,** Geneva College, Beaver Falls, PA, July 12-17, 2027. Click here.
- **Lutheran Week 2027**, Orlando, FL, August 9, 2027 - August 13, 2027. Includes convocation and theology conference. Click here.
- **LCMC 27th Annual Gathering & Convention**. St. Charles Convention Center, St. Charles, Missouri, October 3-6, 2027. Click here.