



Presenter: Rev. Jonathan Hein; Coordinator of WELS Congregational Services; Director of WELS Commission on Congregational Counseling



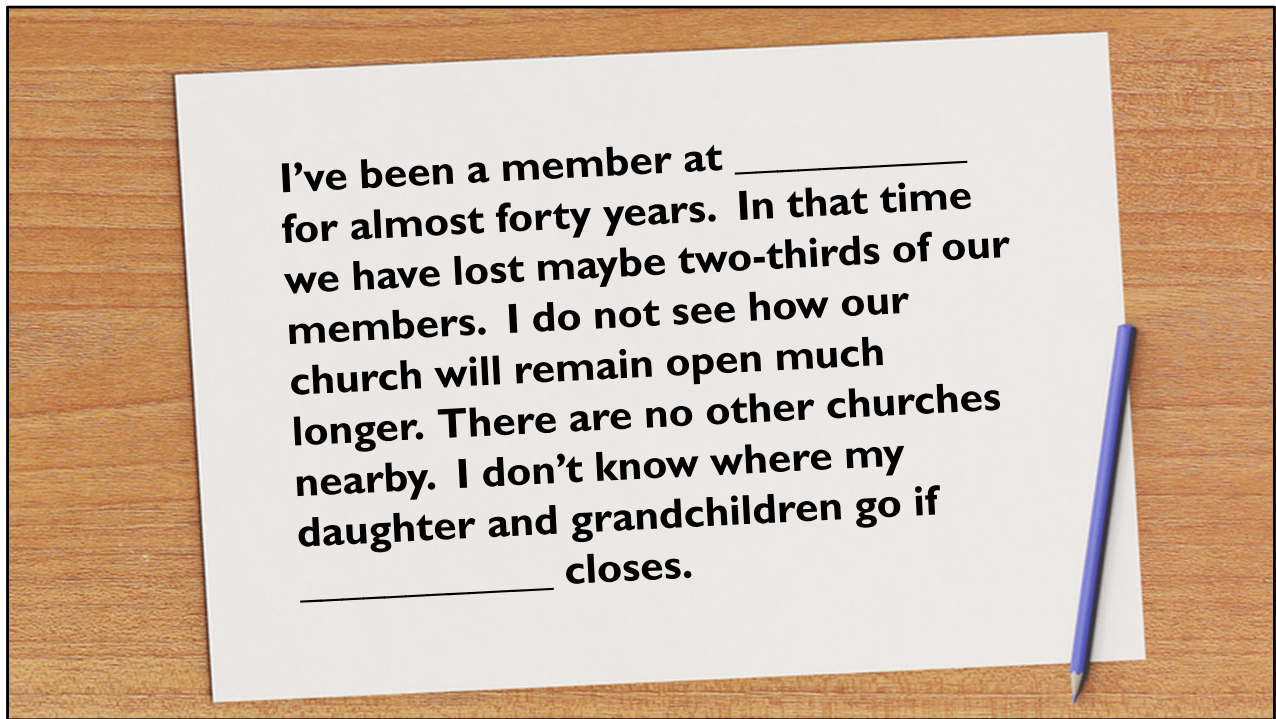
GENESIS 17:7

God said, “I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you and your descendants after you **for the generations to come,** to be your God and the God of your descendants after you.”

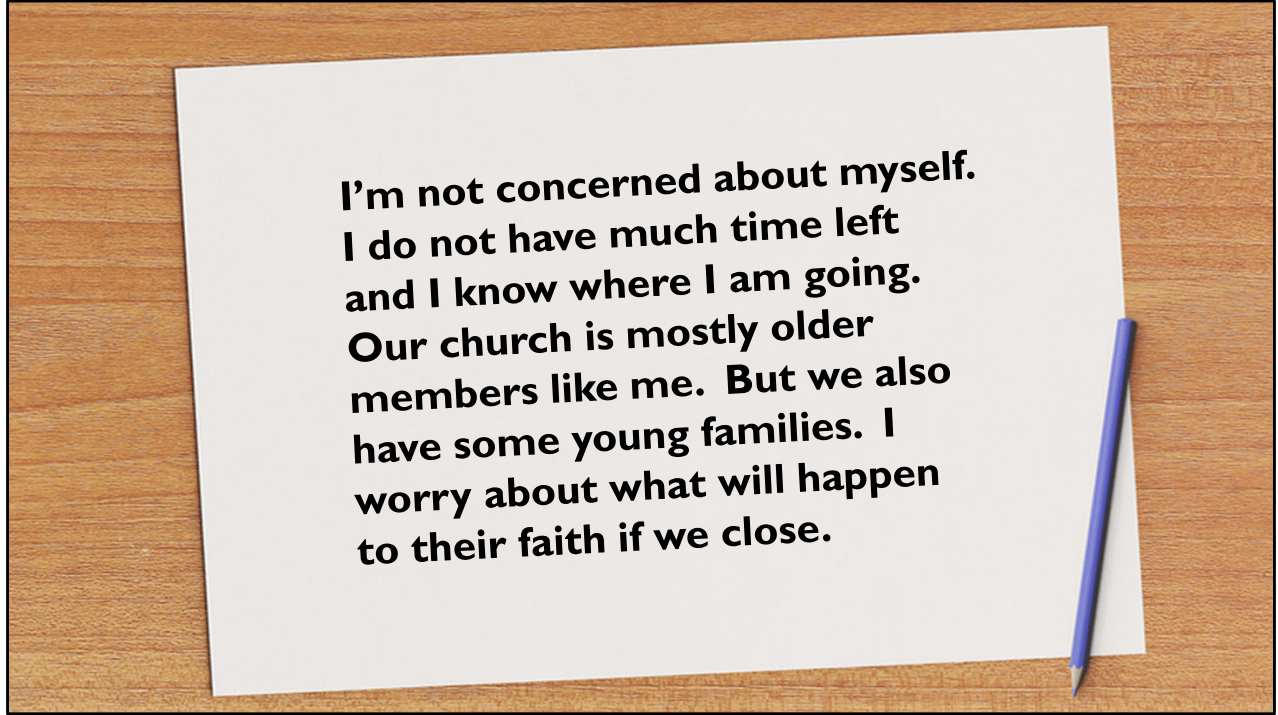
Abram had treated the promise of God lightly. The Lord had promised Abram his descendants would become a great nation. When Abram decided the Lord was too slow in keeping his promise, he decided to take matters into his own hands. He committed adultery with Hagar, the servant of his wife. From this act of adultery, a child was conceived and born, Ishmael. Abraham was 86.

We do not hear of God speaking to Abram again until he is 99. What do you think went through Abram’s mind in those intervening years? Perhaps he thought to himself, *“Is the Lord done with me, due to my lack of faith?”* Perhaps he was worried about any future children too. *“Will God want anything to do with them?”* In Genesis 17, God comes to Abram and gives him a new name: Abraham, “father of many.” He assures Abraham that Sarah will indeed give birth to a son, and from him would descend kings. Then God gives the promise to establish a covenant with Abraham and his descendants “for the generations to come.”

When you look at how that phrase is used in Scripture, it is often spoken by God to comfort a believer who was worrying about his children and his children’s children.



Worrying about our children and grandchildren... This is something on the minds of the saints in WELS. Here is a portion of a letter sent to me by a gentleman who had read the 2019 BORAM. He saw the demographic forecast. It prompted him to write. He expresses concern that his church might close. If that happens, he isn't sure where his daughter and grandchildren will attend.



**I'm not concerned about myself.
I do not have much time left
and I know where I am going.
Our church is mostly older
members like me. But we also
have some young families. I
worry about what will happen
to their faith if we close.**

Here is another snippet of an e-mail sent by a woman whose congregation went through Congregational Counseling's Self-Assessment and Adjustment program. In the course of that assessment, it was determined the congregation could stay open only for four or five more years. She too expresses concern about the spiritual well-being of future generations.



FOR THE GENERATIONS TO COME – a phrase used by God to comfort believers who are worried about their children and their children’s children. It is a good theme for this time and place. Because many WELS members are concerned about the future generations. It is not just that they see American culture “going to hell in a handbasket.” In many cases, they are also concerned about the decline of their congregation. They know that Christianity in America is unraveling. They know that WELS has not been immune. And so they are concerned.

Our prayer for this presentation is that God would come to us and comfort us, just as he did Abraham. Heaven and earth will pass away, but his Word will never pass away. No matter what happens to a congregation, that Word will be there for our children and our children’s children. God’s mercies endure forever. No matter what happens to a church body, that mercy will be there for the generation to come.



Under that theme, we have four objectives.

First, we want to quantify what is happening to WELS. At a synod convention, leaders are asked to make decisions about the direction of their church body. A leader cannot make a good decision if he does not have all the information.

Second, we want to identify the challenges before us. America's religious culture is entering unprecedented territory. Every single serious religious expert would classify America as now being post-Christian. People are leaving Christian churches in droves, for a number of reasons we will attempt to delineate.

BORAM FOREWORD



The theme of the 2019 WELS convention is “For the Generations to Come,” emphasizing the privilege and responsibility that we have to hold onto God’s saving truth for ourselves and to pass it down to those who will come after us. Convention worship, essays, and devotions will focus on that theme and highlight the challenges and privileges we will have as we carry out the mission that God has given to us.

Pres. Schroeder summarized it well in the foreword of the Book of Reports and Memorials. This convention is going to highlight the challenges. But then we will also highlight the privilege God has given us in attempting to meet those challenges.

OBJECTIVES

1. Let's quantify what is happening to WELS.
2. Let's attempt to identify some of the challenges before us.
3. Let's discuss some possible steps we might take to meet those challenges.
4. Let's be certain we understand our motivation.

FOR THE
GENERATIONS
TO COME
SYNOD CONVENTION 2019

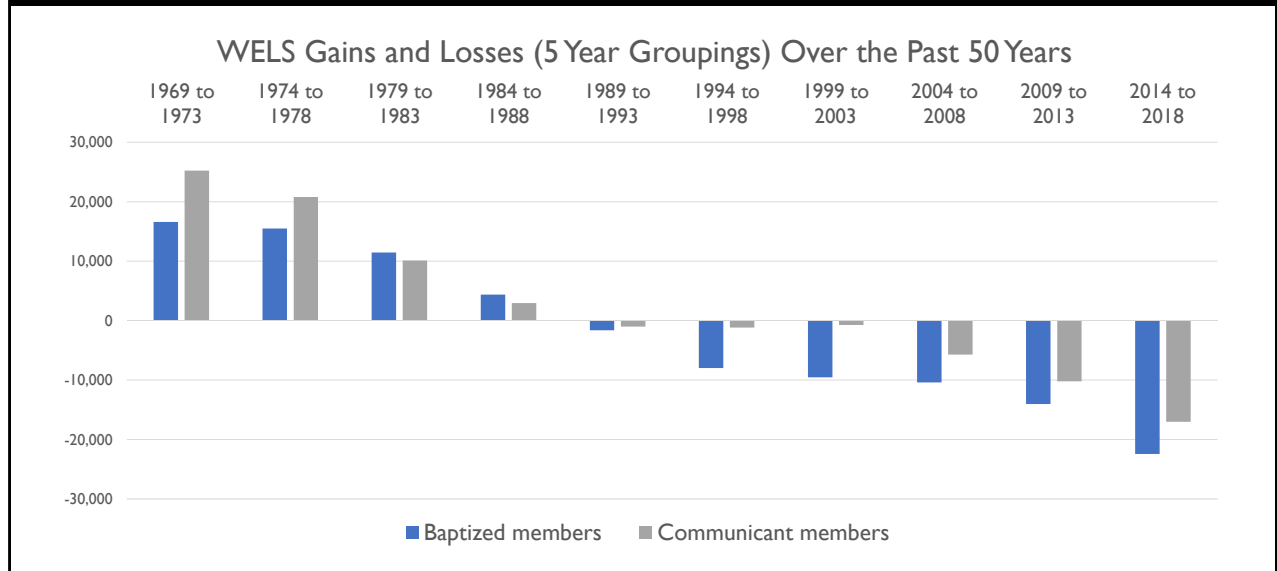
Our third objective is to discuss some ways we might do just that – meet those challenges. What are some possible steps we can take?

Finally, we want to make certain we understand our motivation to do this.



So, let's begin by quantifying exactly what has happened to the WELS and where it looks like we might be going in the future if nothing changes.

THINKING ABOUT FUTURE GENERATIONS



This graph, found in the BORAM, groups all WELS' gains and losses by five year increments over the past 50 years. 50 years ago is about when the turn in American Christianity began in earnest. It also marked a turn in WELS.

After World War I, WELS grew at a pretty good rate almost every year. But 50 years ago, in the late 60s, the rate of growth began to slow. We were still growing, but by less and less each year. That happened until 1991. That was our peak membership. WELS had about 421,000 souls. But after that year, the decline in growth turned into losses. And those losses were like a snowball rolling down a hill. Each year they got bigger and bigger.

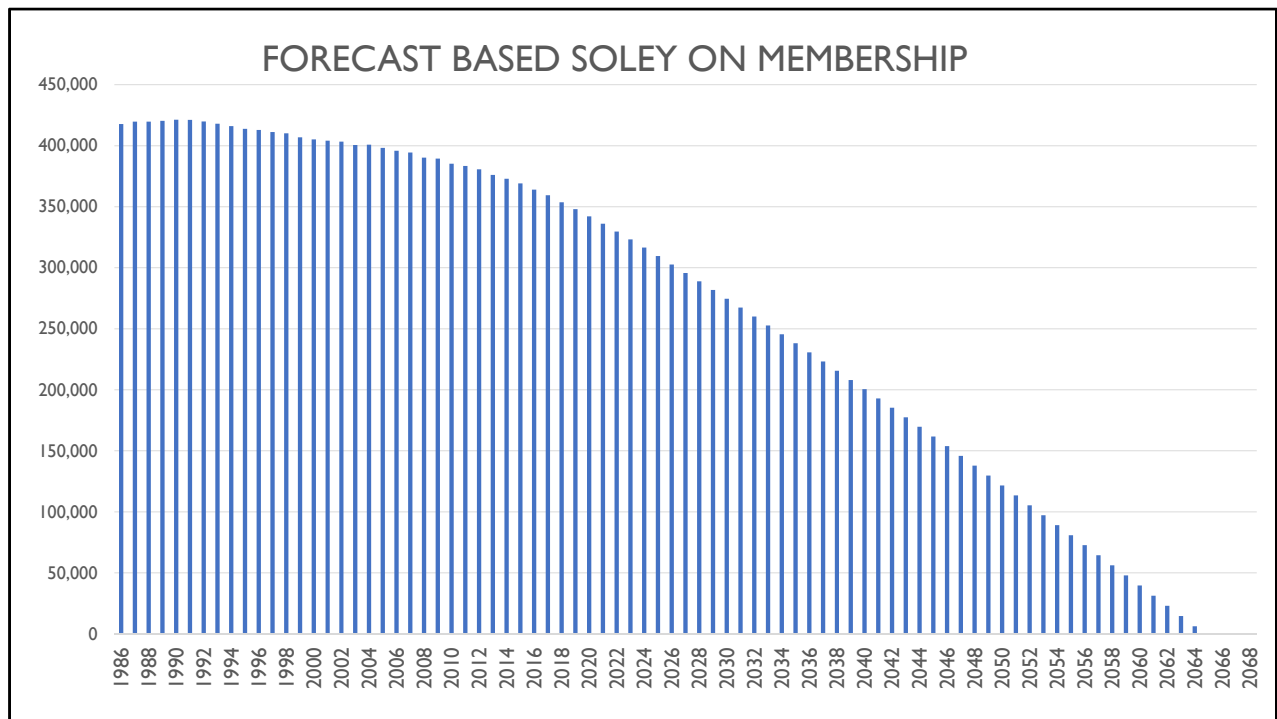
Note the symmetry of this graph. That demonstrates that what we are dealing with is not a modern blip. I don't know if you can even call it a trend. This is a half-century worth of extremely consistent direction.

THE PAST FIVE YEARS

- 2014 = 0.8% decline
- 2015 = 1.0% decline
- 2016 = 1.4% decline
- 2017 = 1.3% decline
- 2018 = 1.6% decline

- 22,400 souls

You see the trend over the past five years. We lose a higher-percentage of members each year. That is troubling. You might expect that eventually, those who wanted to leave the church would be gone, and the losses would trend down. That has not happened now in 30 years. Each year we lose more. Over the past five years, we have lost over 20,000 souls. To put that in perspective, the Evangelical Lutheran Synod has just over 19,000 members. We lost more than the ELS in five years.



In statistical analysis, you can use past data to make forecasts. If you assumed the trends in the various types of gains and losses did not change, that forecast would be extremely dire. WELS would cease to exist in 2065. However, we do not expect all the trends to remain the same.

Take the birth rate, which is reflected in infant baptisms. Over the past 15 years, Millennials have replaced Generation X as the generation in the prime years for having children. We all know that Millennials are having children later in life than previous generations. This also means they have fewer children. So in those 15 years, WELS has gone from having 9,000 infant baptisms per year to having 5,000. That is a massive trend downward. But we would not forecast that trend to continue downward forever. That would be unrealistic. While Millennials are going to have fewer children than Gen X, they will have *some*. So will Generation Z. We aren't going to trend down to 0 births, obvious.

So, forecasting requires us to do our best in estimating where various trends in gains (births, adult confirmations) and losses (removals, people who join another Christian church, people who quit church completely) will go. We do our best, but because we are dealing with multiple trends, the best we can do is provide a forecast range.

FORECAST RANGE: MEMBERS



2039	down 75,000 <i>279,000 members</i>	down 123,000 <i>231,000 members</i>
2059	down 188,000 <i>171,000 members</i>	down 261,000 <i>93,000 members</i>

Here is the forecast range for membership. In one generation, WELS will likely lose between 75,000 and 123,000 members. If that sounds unrealistic, remember that we lost over 22,000 in the past five years, and that the percent of members lost annually is trending upward.

In two generations, WELS would lose between 188,000 and 261,000. You'll note at the high-end of that forecast, WELS would have fewer than 100,000 members.

FORECAST RANGE: CONGREGATIONS



2039

down 260

1010 congregations

down 400

870 congregations

2059

down 690

580 congregations

down 940

330 congregations

WELS is down over 70,000 members from our historic high. Someone might ask, “Why haven’t we lost a ton of churches?” The explanation is simple. WELS has a lot of older churches carrying little or no debt. If a church has no debt, it can survive if it declines from 900 members to 100 members. With 100 members, the congregation can still afford a pastor and maintain the facilities. So congregations can hold on for a long time. It is when they decline from 100 to 40... 30... 20 members... that remaining open stays challenging.

The closing of WELS congregations has begun. When you dig into the statistical reports over the past two decades, you see that 10 to 20 years ago, WELS closed about one church every 8 to 10 months. (You *always* are going to have some congregations close in a synod our size.) In the last three years, the rate of closure has increased to one congregation every 8 to 10 weeks.

So, here is the forecast range for WELS congregations over the next two generations. You’ll note that it’s possible in two generations, nationwide WELS would have a total number of congregations in the mid 300s.



WHY THIS IS CONCERNING

1. We are concerned for the souls that are no longer connected to the Means of Grace.
2. We are concerned how this might impact our worldwide gospel efforts.

FOR THE
GENERATIONS
TO COME
SYNOD CONVENTION 2019

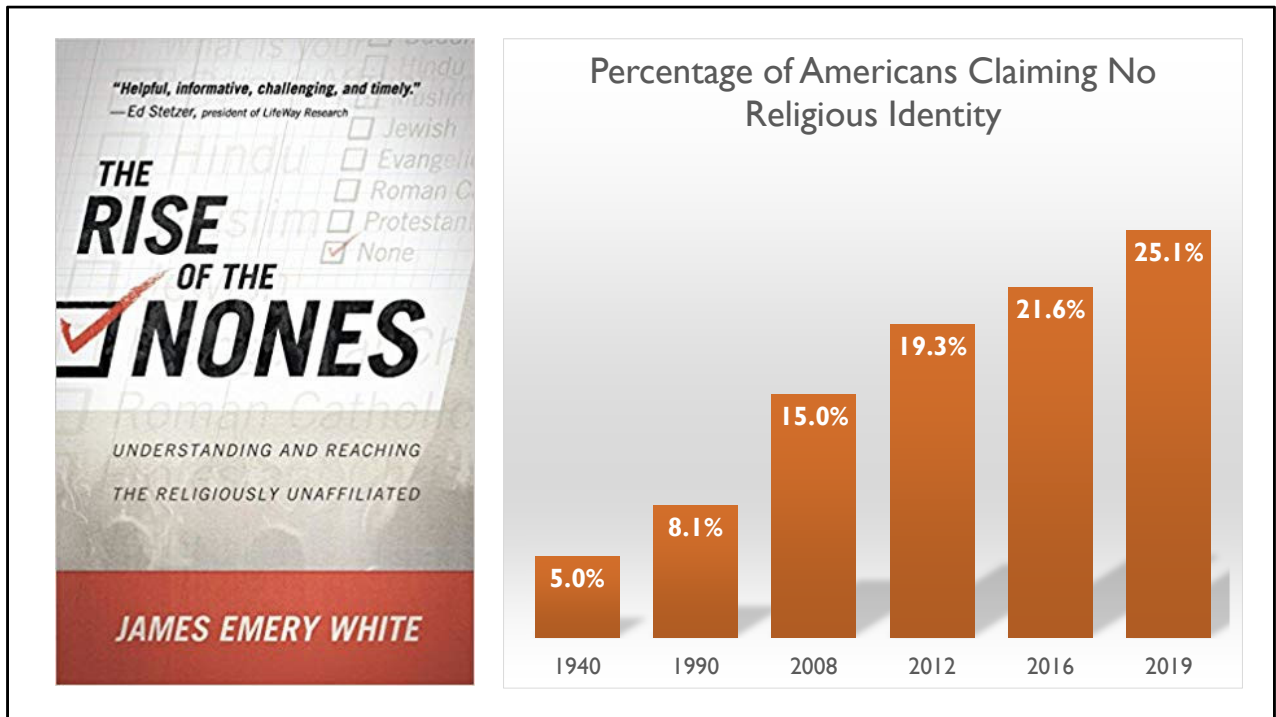
Again, this is not unique to WELS. In the 2017 demographic report shared to the synod convention, it was demonstrated that in the same time WELS declined 9% from her historic high membership, the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod declined 15%. The largest Presbyterian church body lost 50% of its membership. I mentioned how in five years, WELS lost more members than are in all of the ELS. In two years, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America lost more than all the members in WELS – over 400,000 souls. Even the Southern Baptists, known to be a very mission minded denomination, have been in decline over the past 16 years. That doesn't provide much comfort, being the healthiest patient in the ICU! But it does illustrate this is not a matter of, "What is WELS doing wrong?" All Christian churches are struggling.

Why does this concern us? First, we are concerned for the souls that have left our congregations. Over the last 30 years, WELS has averaged 8000 back-door losses every year – approximately a quarter-million people. Some left for other Christian denominations. Most just quit church completely. We are concerned about the fact they are not connected to the Means of Grace.

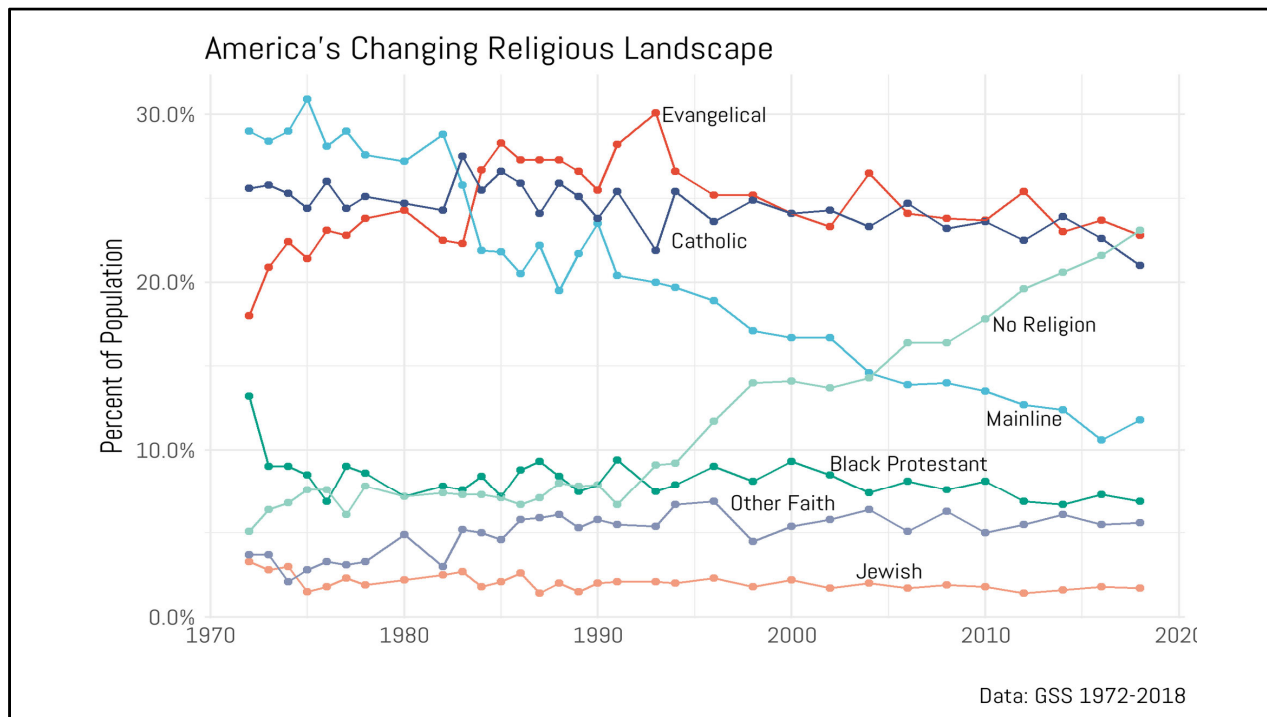
Second, we are concerned about how this decline could affect our ability to conduct world-wide gospel ministry. Everything we do as a synod in Missions and Ministerial Education is predicated upon us having a strong backbone of congregation to support those efforts. If that backbone crumbles, it will be impossible to expand those efforts. It will be challenging to simply maintain them.



So, we know what is happening to WELS. We said this is a phenomena that is affecting all American Christianity. What are the challenges that is creating this crisis? That's the second thing we want to talk about.



We already summarized the challenge: Christianity in America is unraveling. This is chronicled well in the book *The Rise of the Nones* by James Emery White. White demonstrates how more and more, Americans are not identifying with any religion. This does not mean they become atheists. They perhaps still believe in God and pray. They just don't want to associate with any particular denomination. And they certainly don't want to go to church. Currently, 1 in 4 Americans claims no religious identity. The trend is worse among younger generations. With those 30 and younger, it's between 42 and 45%.



This data comes from the General Social Survey out of the University of Chicago. It tracks various religious groupings over the past 50 years, which we said is when this challenge to American Christianity began in earnest.

At that time, the largest religious grouping were the Mainline denominations, which includes most Protestant denominations. They reached their peak in the mid 70s. They have been in a sharp decline since.

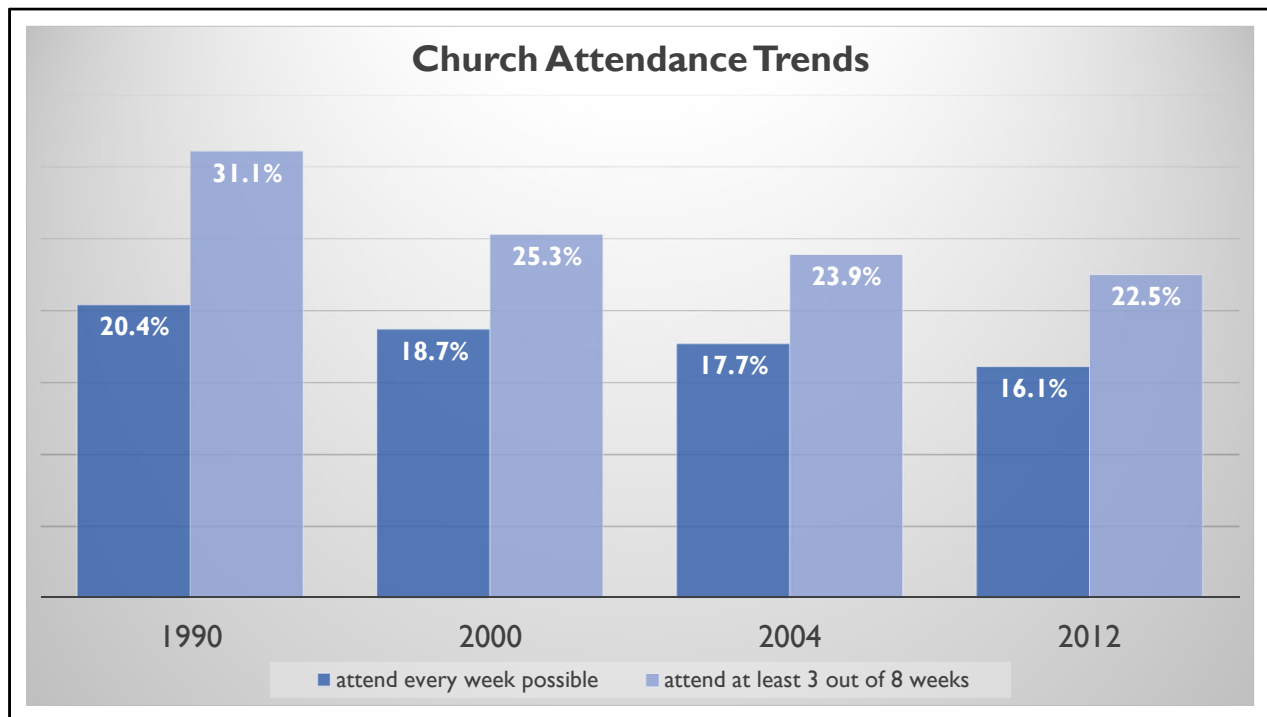
The Evangelicals saw a rise in the 80s and 90s. But they too peaked and have been in decline since then, albeit slower than the Mainline denominations.

Catholics, which peaked at about 28% of the population in the early 80s has been on a steady, slow decline. Their decline would be higher were it not for the fact that the vast majority of Latino immigrants in America are Catholic.

You will see that there is one religious grouping that has grown consistently over the past 50 years – the religiously unaffiliated, “the none’s.” They are now the largest religious grouping in America.



Just to highlight this issue. In just one decade, the number of Americans who identify as having no religion grew by about 26-million people, a 72.6% growth rate. Currently, it is close to 70 million Americans who claim to have no religious affiliation. The upside of this is that we are surrounded by a ripe mission field.



This data comes from a study published in the *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*. It was conducted by C. Kurt Hadaway and Penny Long Marler. After World War II, on any given Sunday, 40% of Americans would go to church in a given week. That has plummeted. In 2012, it was only 16% in church on any given week.

When you compare these numbers to the decline in church membership, it shows that the problem is not just that people are leaving the church. Those who remain in church are attending less frequently... becoming less involved.

CHURCH CLOSINGS IN AMERICA

> 5000 per year

> 96 per week



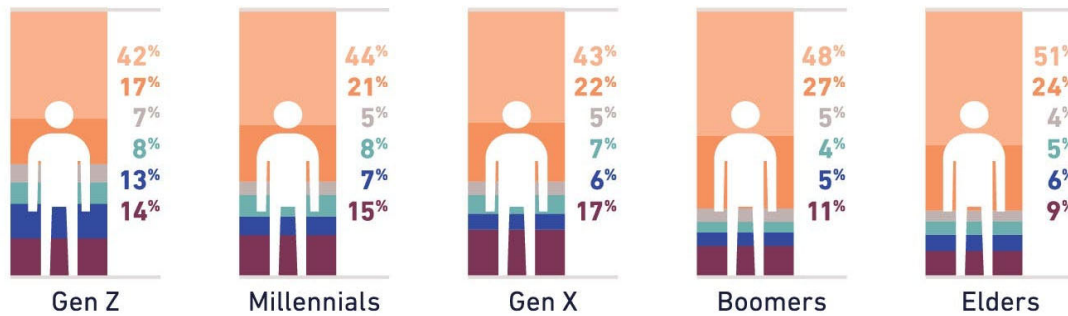
When you dig into the demographic data of all the denominations, it's telling. Over the last decade, America has lost about 5,000 Christian churches each year. There are some Christian researchers (for example Thom Ranier, former president of Lifeway Publishing and now CEO of *Church Answers*) who put closings at 6,000 to 10,000. That seems high when you dig into denominational data. But 5000+ is still substantial. Think of it this way: 13 churches close every day.

U.S. Religious Identity 2018

Barna

Which of the following best describes your religious faith?

- Christian (non-Catholic)
- Catholic
- Other faith
- Agnostic
- Atheist
- None of these



U.S. teens ages 13–18, n=1,490, Nov. 4–16, 2016. U.S. adults 19 and older, n=1,517, Nov. 4–16, 2016.

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This is going to be a long-term trend. Why? Because we see each generation getting more and more unchurched.

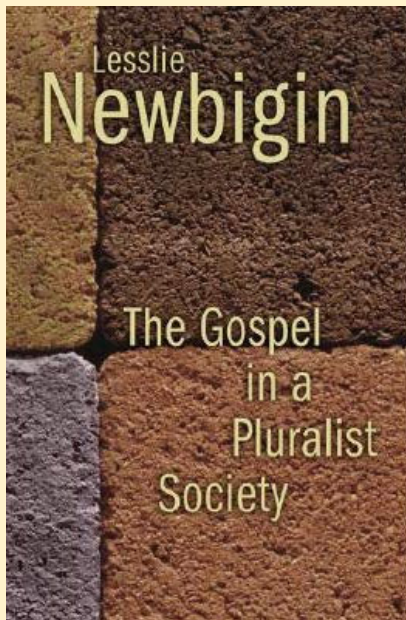
This chart provides a great example. Look at the jump in people identifying as atheist in one generation. Among Millennials it is 7%. But 13% of Gen Z identify as atheists.

The youngest generation in America (sometimes called “iGen”), is the first generation where a good majority have almost no church experience. They perhaps have set foot in a church on Christmas Eve with grandma or to attend a funeral. But other than that, they know nothing about religion. For the first time in American history, we have a substantial portion of the younger population that has no contact with church at all. Religion is going to seem odd to them. More on this later.



So, we have said that American Christianity as a whole is unraveling. Let's dig into some of the underlying reasons. What follows are some massive religious cultural shifts contributing to this decline.

First, postmodernism has led to religious pluralism. Postmodernism is a philosophy that came to prominence in the last part of the 20th century. It's central tenet is that there is no such thing as absolute truth. Truth is subjective and personal. What is "truth" for you is not necessarily truth for me. Think of what that does to religion. Christianity ceases to be absolute truth: Jesus is God and man; he died for sins and rose again, seen by more than 500 witnesses; etc. Christianity is one of many possible coping mechanisms. If believing that when you die you go to heaven gives you comfort, that's your truth. But if your neighbor is comforted by the thought that when his dad died, he became one with nature, that's *his* truth. If you believe Jesus is God and that gives you peace and purpose, that's your truth. But if you believe Allah is God and that gives you peace and purpose, that's fine too. That's religious pluralism. All religions are equally valid, because they are all equally true to their followers.



TWO PREDICTIONS:

1. The church would be viewed as irrelevant.
2. Churches with exclusivity claims would be perceived especially negatively.

2014 SURVEY (BARNA GROUP)

1. "Is attending church important?" 2 in 10 of those under the age of 30 say "yes."
2. "The church does more harm than good." 1 in 3 of those under the age of 30 agree.

In 1989, a Reformed theologian named Lesslie Newbigin wrote a book about the rise of religious pluralism titled *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*. He made two predictions. First, Newbigin said that as religious pluralism caught on, churches would be viewed as irrelevant. After all, if churches don't have the truth but simply offering coping mechanisms, how important can they be. Second, Newbigin said that as religious pluralism spread, churches that had an exclusivity claiming (i.e. a claim that they were the true religion and others were false) would be viewed negatively. That's us! We don't say that Jesus is *a* way... *a* truth. We say he's *the* way... *the* truth... *the* life. That is pushing your truth upon others, which is a no-no in a postmodern, pluralistic world.

Newbigin's predictions were spot on. A 2014 survey conducted by the Barna Group asked people under the age of 30, "Is attending church important?" Only 2 in 10 said yes. The church has become irrelevant in the eyes of that younger generation. The survey asked if they agreed with the statement, "*The church does more harm than good.*" 1 in 3 said yes.

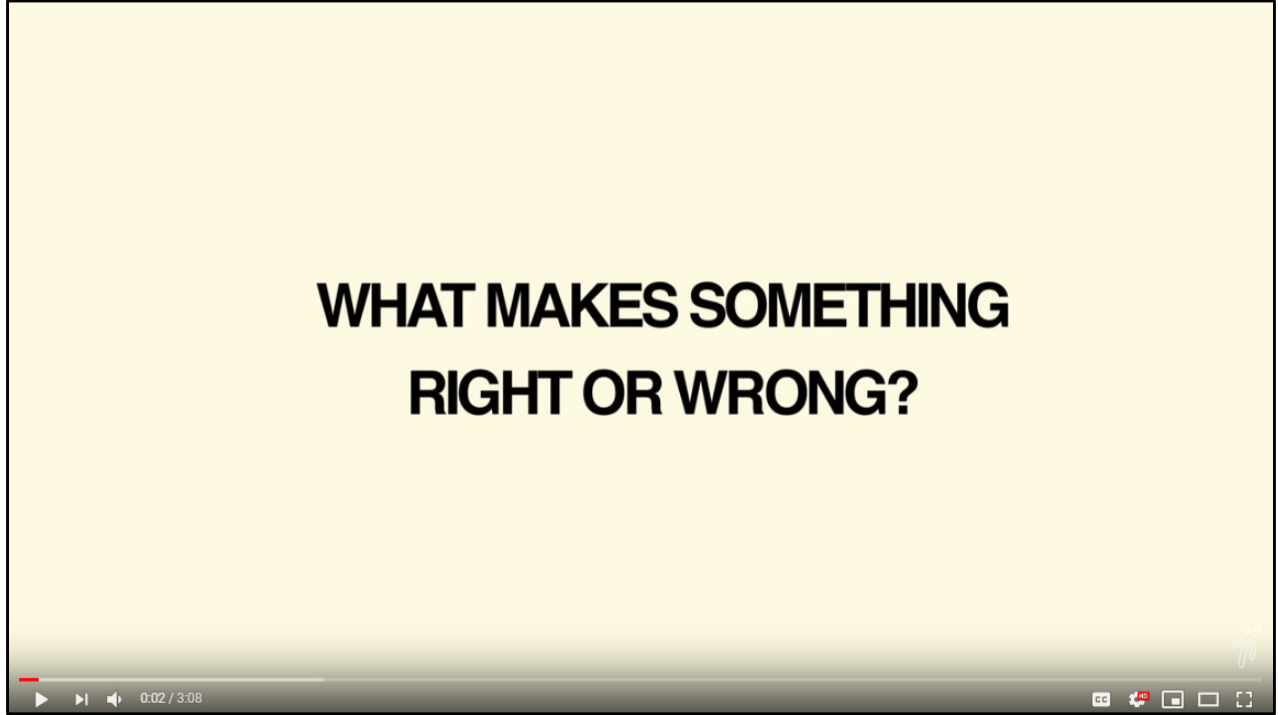
<https://www.barna.com/research/americans-divided-on-the-importance-of-church/>



Here is another big shift in American Christianity. Secular humanism has become the basis for morality and ethics.

Secularism is the de-emphasis on anything religious, or even just “spiritual”: the soul, the afterlife, God, etc. It is an emphasis on this world, the here and now. Humanism is the belief that humans can find purpose and meaning and morality on their own. I.e. They do not need something like religion to give it to them.

Sometimes people will speak of secular humanism as being almost synonymous with atheism. It is not. An atheist says, “There is no god. We are on our own.” A true secular humanist would say, “I don’t know if there is a god or not. It does not matter. I don’t need him to live a fulfilling life.”



You can find the video at this link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9tpL1K8ZqrU&t=76s>

This video was put together by a group trying to promote secular humanism.

ROMANS 1:18,19

The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of people, **who suppress the truth** by their wickedness, since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them.



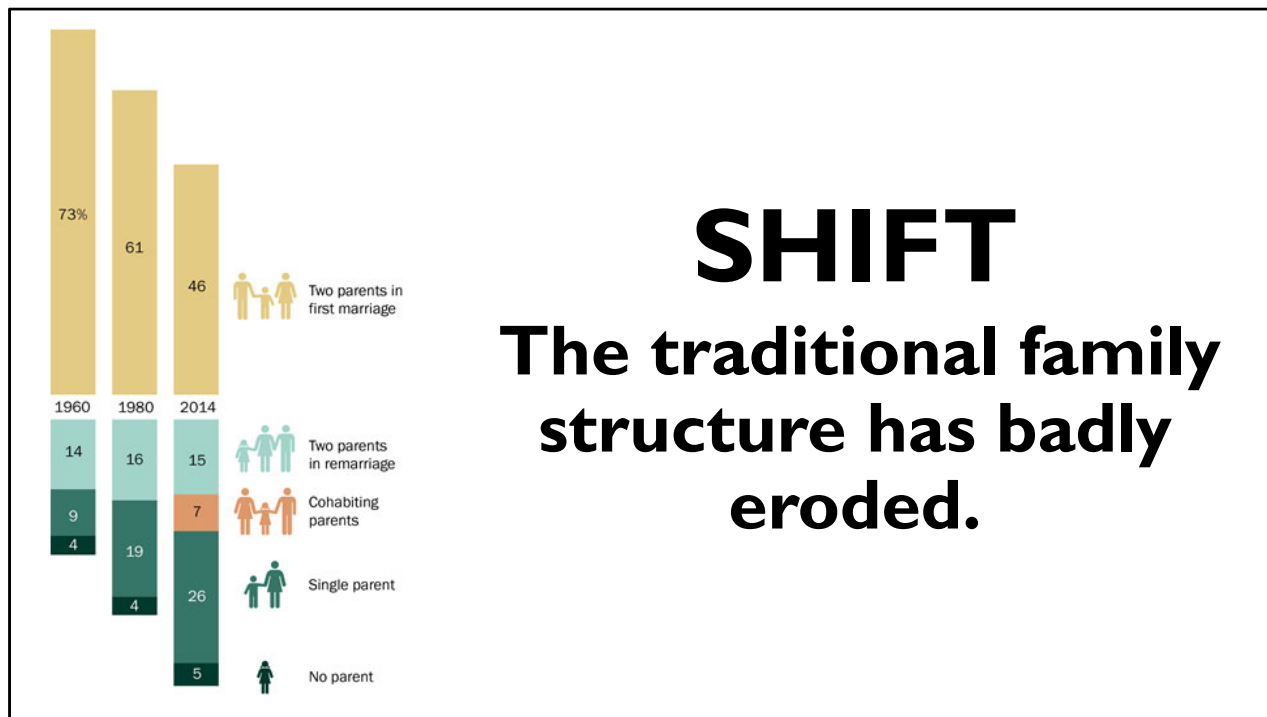
In Romans 1, it says that sinful/natural man suppresses knowledge. You had an example of that in the video. To highlight that humans don't need religion or spirituality, the narrator points out that in the animal world, we see creatures who know nothing about god treating each other with kindness and respect.

Where does that happen? Not only will one species of animals brutalize one another, even within the species, you will get horrible violence. A baboon will rip out the throat of another baboon to get to his mate. Have you ever turned on the nature channel and seen the hyenas forming an orderly line, taking turns eating from a dead elephant? The claim of the video is ridiculous – a suppressing of the truth. But that is secular humanism, the belief that we do not need a God or religion to teach us right from wrong. The secular humanist will say that all we need is reason to guide our conscience. What is ironic is he fails to understand that the conscience itself is the will of God written upon our heart.



Those first two shifts – the rise of secular humanism and religious pluralism – have led to this third shift. There is no longer any guilt in not following Christian norms. Fifty years ago, people typically would not want to admit they didn't go to church. Today, people don't care about admitting that.

You really see this in youth sports. When I was a child, there was no soccer or softball on Sundays. But when I served as a parish pastor in Charleston, SC (the very conservative buckle of the Bible belt), even there I had to compete with Sunday youth sports.



Another contributor to the shift in American Christianity is that the traditional family structure has been badly eroded. The rise of divorce in the last part of the 20th century meant a lot of kids grew up in situations where they were shuttled back and forth on weekends, so no pattern of attendance at one church was well-established. It was normal to go every other weekend or less.

Single parenthood has risen drastically, and single parents go to church at about half the rate as that of couples. We can probably sympathize. A single mom with two kids has to get them ready for church on her own. When she gets them to church, they misbehave. There is no father to help bring them in line. So the mom doesn't feel like she gets much out of the church service.

Cohabiting parents has become a real thing and is growing at an extremely fast rate. Their church attendance rate is near zero.

(This graph comes from the Pew Research center.)

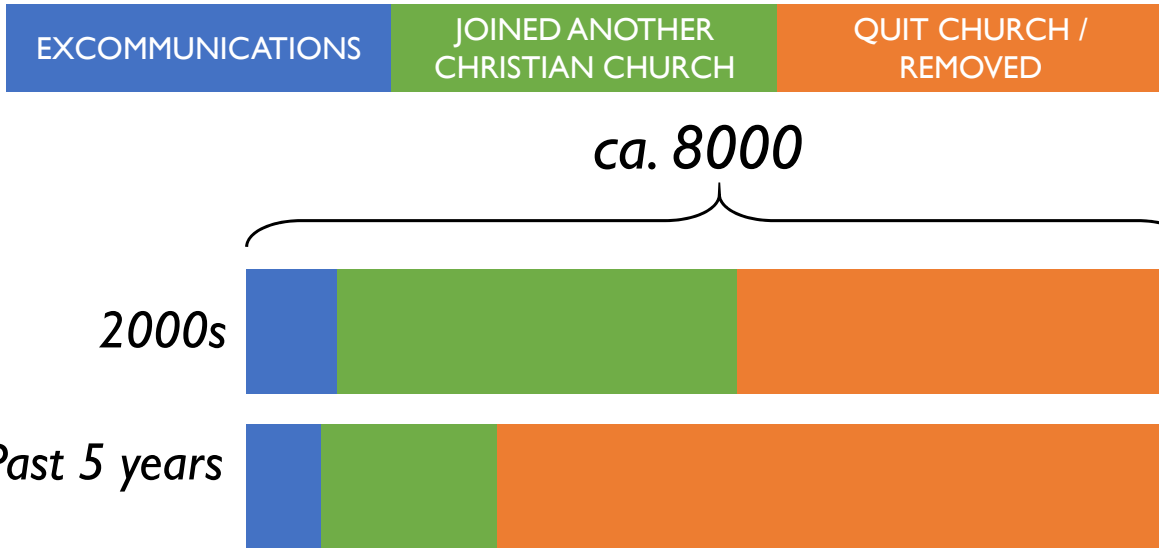


Another shift is that Americans do not trust the church. There are other institutions that they trust less, like congress. But the sexual scandals in the Catholic church and the embezzlement scandals in some mega churches has had an adverse effect.



Here is a troubling corresponding shift. It used to be that when there was a scandal in a church, some members would leave for awhile, but eventually come back. Or they would perhaps join a different Christian church. Now, when there is a scandal or some other sort of turmoil in a congregation, people quit church completely. It is almost like Americans are just looking for a reason to be done with church. This is a big challenge, because churches are made up of sinners. So scandals or conflict or hypocrisy are inevitable.

Annual Back-door Losses in WELS



You see this trend in WELS. Earlier we mentioned that over the past 30 years we have lost around 8,000 to 9,000 people every year. In the early 90s, those losses were split pretty evenly between two columns: “joined another Christian congregation” and “removals.” But in the past five years, if someone leaves the WELS, they are 400% more likely just to be completely done with church than they are to join a different denomination.



Here is a massive shift, especially among younger generations. Technology has changed the way we consume content.

People want illocal consumption. If it is your anniversary next week, you don't need to go to the flower shop or jewelry to get your wife a gift. From anywhere, you can take out your phone, open up the correct app, and order what you want.

People want asynchronous consumption. One of our family traditions growing up was that every Saturday at 8pm my entire family would gather in the living room to watch *The Muppet Show*. We had to be there at 8pm on a Saturday, or we missed it. Today, the vast majority of television is watched through streaming services. People can consume the television content they want when they want.

So, think of how different church is. If the worship services is perceived primarily as the sharing of spiritual content, we tell people, "You need to be here and this specific time to access this content." That is *not* how people consume content today.

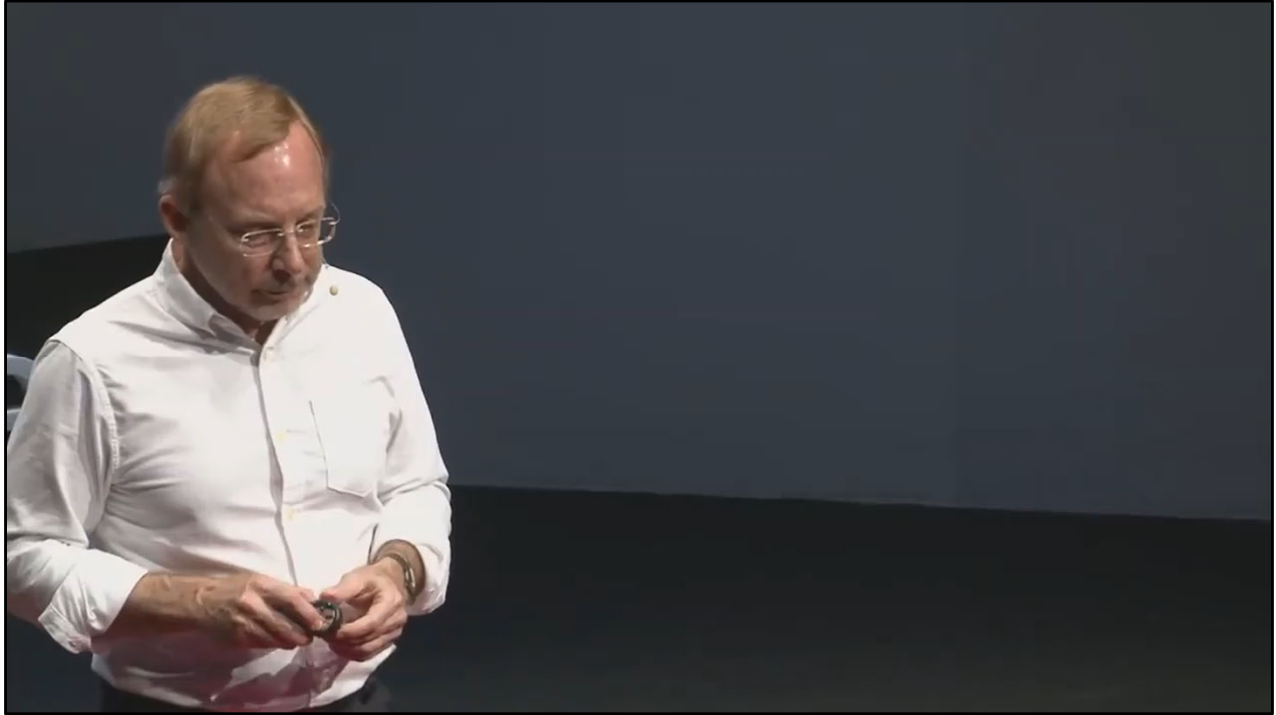
Apply this to the church. If people think of the benefits of church as being that you can hear a good gospel message and sing along with good gospel-centered music, why do they need you at all? Between podcasts and online services, they can get those things without physically attending church.

OTHER CULTURAL CHANGES

- **The loss of any sort of brand loyalty.**
- **The increase in self-directed help.**
- **Increased affluence.**
- **Increase in scheduled free time.**



There are a lot of other cultural changes we could get into if we had more time. Suffice it to say, each of these, on their own, doesn't seem that big. But cumulatively they are having a massive effect on America's religious culture. We saw that earlier, when we looked at how many people are leaving the church.



You can find this video clip here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YtAR_OGzlcg

This video is a Ted Talk held by Dr. David Voas, a quantitative social scientist who heads the social science department at UCL Institute of Education (University College London).

Remember, earlier that there is now a substantial portion of the population who has never had contact with a church. That (and modernization) is what leads Voas to conclude that religion in the West is doomed to dwindle to almost being nonexistent. He explains that while in the past, Christianity has had times of revival (e.g. the Great Awakening), he believes that is no longer possible.

Is he right? Yes, if spiritual revival of the Church were up to man. It's impossible. But walking on water is impossible. Feeding 5,000 people with a boy's lunch is impossible. Our God is the God of impossible. It is impossible that you and me, who were born spiritually dead and hostile to God, now not only know him, but love him. But that is what the gospel can do – the impossible.

We possess that powerful gospel. Our responsibility is not to revive the church. Our responsibility is to do all we can with that gospel, and leave the fruits of our efforts up to our God.



So, let's discuss what might be some possible steps moving forward. I want to work through this third section by asking some key questions that relate to the challenges we just talked about.

KEY QUESTION

How much of the blame for the decline in church life do we place upon culture?

How much blame do we place upon ourselves?

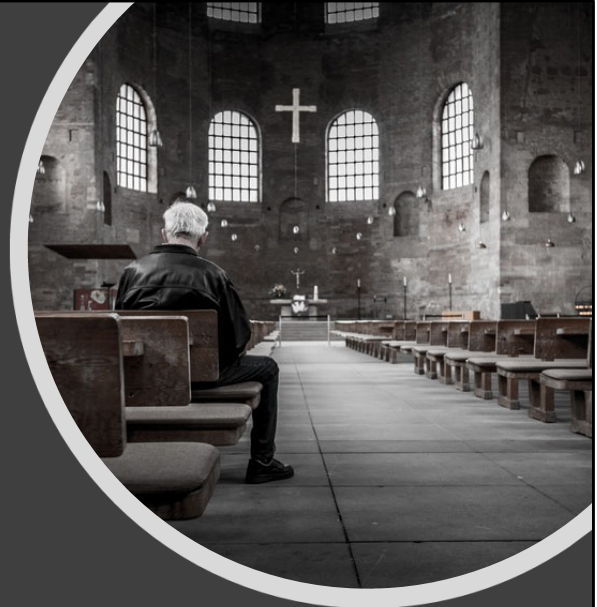


When we look at the decline in our congregations, it can be very easy simply to blame it all on the changing American culture that we've been talking about. Or we remind ourselves that we are living in the End Times. Jesus himself said that in these End Times, "The love of most will grow cold" (Matthew 24:12). These are all undoubtedly factors.

However, it would be wrong if we failed to acknowledge that perhaps some of the problems we face are our own making.

Understand that a congregation has a culture too.

Acknowledge that not all aspects of that culture are good, i.e. helpful to Christ's mission.



Congregations have culture too: shared values and ideals. And a congregation's culture may not be entirely healthy. This is to be expected. St. Paul writes, "I know that good itself does not dwell in me, that is, in my sinful nature" (Romans 7:18). Congregations are made up of sinners. It would be unrealistic to think that a group of sinners would always have their values aligned perfectly with Christ. In every congregation, the sinful nature will manifest itself. It is simply a matter of how.



Rotten Culture

- ❑ CONSUMERISM / SELFISHNESS
- ❑ INWARD FOCUS
- ❑ APATHY / RESIGNATION
- ❑ PASTOR AS DOER, NOT EQUIPPER
- ❑ PRIDEFUL
- ❑ STATUS QUO = A CORE VALUE
- ❑ FACILITY OVER MINISTRY
- ❑ REFUSAL TO HONESTLY ASSESS
- ❑ INSTITUTIONALISM
- ❑ PAROCHIALISM

In some congregations, the sinful nature might manifest itself through a consumerism mindset. Members have the attitude, “You need to give me the church I want. Worship how I want, singing the hymns I like, at the time I prefer!” Or “The church better provide me a Lutheran school for my kids. And I give offerings, so don’t you dare ask me to contribute more in the way of tuition.” The people view the church as a commodity which they can consume, rather than an entity they can serve.

In some congregations, the sinful nature might manifest itself by having an inward focus which results in an apathy for the lost. If you look at the Great Commission passages and boil them down, the mission of the Church comes down to two primary activities. There is the “go” aspect—evangelism. We are to share the gospel with everyone we can so the Spirit might have the opportunity to pull the people into the Church. Once they are in our congregation, there is the disciplining aspect. We continue to share God’s Word with them to bring them even closer to Christ... to move them along a spectrum of increased Biblical knowledge and increased sanctified service of God and neighbor. If congregations plan for the latter, budget for the latter, train people for the latter, but hope the former (evangelism) just occurs naturally, there is an unhealthy aspect to their culture... a disbalance in their approach to Christ’s mission.

We could go on and on, but you get the point. Yes, much of the challenges we are facing is due to a changing American religious culture. But some of it is likely due to rotten culture within our congregation.

by the power of the Spirit...



We will acknowledge that it is not just the world around us that has a sinful culture. Our congregation can have sinful aspects to its culture as well. We repent. In our planning, we produce the appropriate fruits.

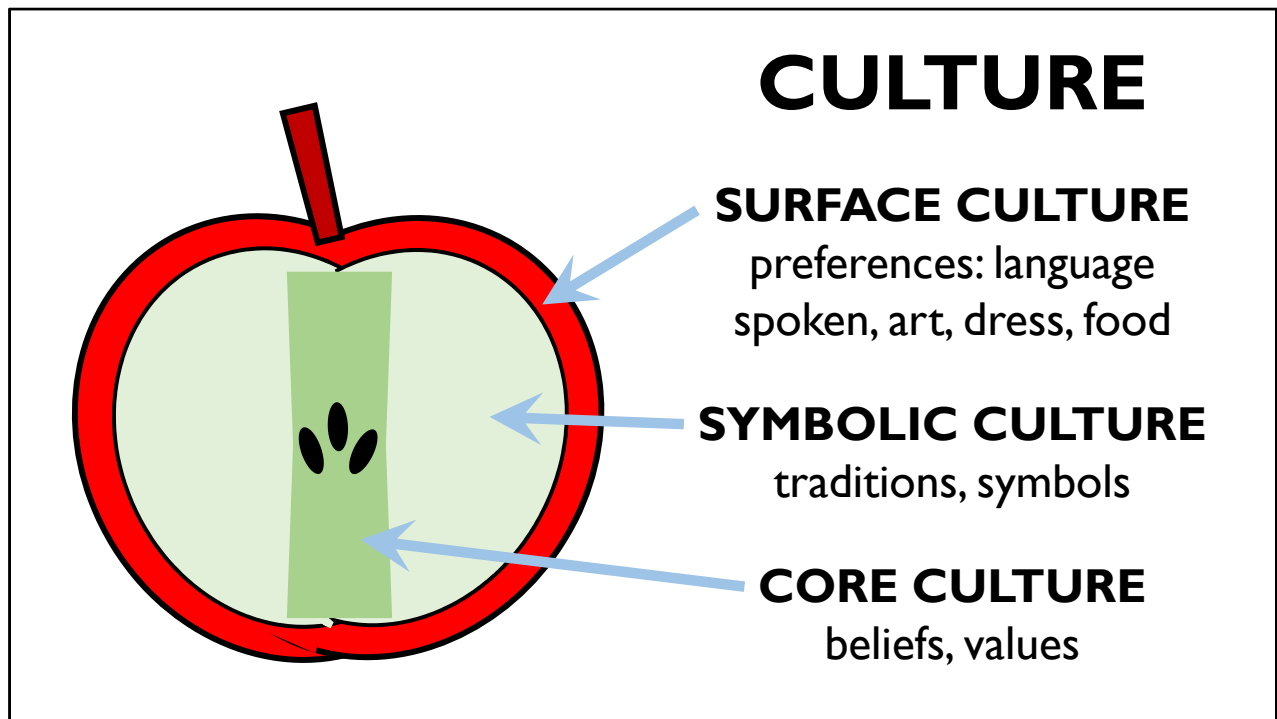
Therefore, moving forward, step one must be that we acknowledge it when our congregational values and culture are manifestations of the selfish sinful nature. This is so very Lutheran. The first of Martin Luther's 95 Theses stated that the entire life of the believer is one of repentance. We can do this because we understand God's unconditional grace. Our approval before God is not based on our performance, but on Christ's performance. We are saved, not because we have been so faithful. We are not always faithful. Rather, we are saved because God himself God is faithful in keeping is promises of mercy and grace. Secure in that mercy, we are free to acknowledge where our lives and our ministry efforts have fallen short of seeking God's glory and mission above all else.

KEY QUESTION

How do we combat pluralism, humanism, and the mistrust of the church that has crept into our culture?



Next key question: let's wrestle with those seismic shifts in America's religious culture.



To answer this question, we probably need to make certain we understand what culture is. Some have defined culture as the personality of a group. New Ulm, for example, has a culture. The town has a personality. Congregations can have a personality.

Others have defined culture as the sum total of all that is shared by a group: shared preferences, shared traditions, shared values. Let's work with that. I think you can picture culture like an apple. There is the culture that is easily seen and quickly perceived, surface culture. Those are the groups preferences about things like art and music and food. If you dig into a group a little more, you learn about their symbolic culture. What are the traditions that are important to them? You learn about their symbols. What does it mean in America when a man has a gold shield, i.e. a badge, on his chest? That's symbolic culture. But ultimately, what we care about most is what is at the core of the group. Their deepest beliefs and values. That's core culture. That is what we are trying to change.

So part of ministry is understanding the culture of the people you are trying to reach. When appropriate, we will utilize and accommodate those upper levels of culture in our effort to change their core culture—their beliefs.



ACTS 13
Synagogue in Pisidian Antioch

ACTS 17
Areopagus in Athens

St. Paul was a master of this. In Acts 13, he is witnessing in a synagogue in Pisidian Antioch. Notice how he accommodates their surface and symbolic culture. He follows the traditions of the synagogue. He does not speak until all the lessons are read and the ruler of the synagogue asks if anyone would like to comment. When Paul does speak, he quotes the Scriptures. He cites Jewish heroes: Abraham, Moses, David. And accommodated those surface levels of culture in his effort to change their core culture – their values and beliefs. They valued being descendants of Abraham. Paul explained to them that the only thing special about that nation is that the Messiah came from the Jews, that if they wanted to be proud of their heritage then they needed to acknowledge that Jesus was that Messiah.

Contrast that to Paul's tactics in Acts 17 when he's speaking on Mars Hill in Athens. While Paul certainly shared Scriptural concepts, we are not told that he quotes any Scripture. Instead, Paul quoted Greek poets. He commends the Athenians for being religious and notes all the temples and shrines that they've built. He points out that they even built a shrine to an unknown god. He tells them that while it's good they are religious, until they know that unknown God, their religious is worthless. Paul accommodates surface and symbolic culture in his effort to change their core culture, their most deeply held beliefs about the gods.



Paul Wendland,
*The Apostle Paul and
Culture*

Culture is hugely important when it comes to communicating Christ in a way that our listeners can understand. We want to do everything that we can to remove stumbling blocks to the truth, and so we will adapt our message, as did Paul. That means we will adapt, wherever possible, our forms of communication (story, speech, song) so that they are congenial to the host culture... Paul felt free to quote Greek poets. We are free to use their appropriate cultural equivalent in our own communicative context. Yet we remain true to the message of sin and grace. We will not dilute the word of truth. We will not hold back from saying, "Repent!"

If we are going to share the gospel in a rapidly changing culture, there is an imperative that we make the necessary steps to understand our local community. What are the preferences of the people God has called us to serve? What are their traditions and customs. When it is appropriate, we are willing to accommodate those upper levels of culture in our effort to change their core culture, so that whatever it is they currently value, they value Christ more.

Professor Paul Wendland wrote a paper about the importance of understanding the culture of the people we have been called to serve. Here's a quote.

(Mequon, WI: WLS Essay File, 2006), 9.



The INSTITUTE *for* LUTHERAN APOLOGETICS

In the BORAM, you perhaps read about the Institute for Lutheran Apologetics, which will begin to function in 2020. Apologetics is narrowly defined as the defense of the faith. I think it could probably be more broadly defined as presenting the faith in a way that meets the challenges posed by an anti-Christian culture.

The ILA will bring together pastors, teachers, and laymen (in the scientific community) with a passion for apologetics. There will be two main focuses.

- 1) The ILA will work to coordinate a kindergarten through college curricula to help prepare our young WELS members to face the secular humanism that dominates our culture, especially in public secondary education.
- 2) The ILA will consider how to help WELS members to present and defend the faith in winsome ways that are easily perceived by this changing American culture.

by the power of the Spirit...

We will seek to better understand our local culture and community. We will appropriately accommodate surface culture (preferences & customs) in our desire to change the core culture (beliefs) of the people God brings into our circle of influence.

TO
CHANGE
THE
WORLD

THE IRONY,
TRAGEDY, &
POSSIBILITY OF
CHRISTIANITY
IN THE
LATE MODERN
WORLD

JAMES DAVISON
HUNTER

I would suggest that a theology of faithful presence first calls Christians to attend to the people and places they experience directly. **THE DOCTRINE OF VOCATION** disconnected from people and places across time and space. Believers are called to “go into all the world.” But with that said, the call of faithful presence gives priority to what is right in front of us—the community, the neighborhood, and the city, and the people of which these are constituted.

If pluralism and humanism consist of thoughts and concepts, then they are fought, to a degree, with thoughts and concepts. That’s the purpose of exegizing our culture and apologetics. However, we are going to need to win an audience so we have the opportunity to share those thoughts and concepts. That is increasingly harder in our culture, when Christians are viewed as anti-intellectual, bigoted, close minded, and the like.

This is a book that does an excellent job of articulating a strategy for how we might win an audience for the gospel. *To Change the World: the Irony, Tragedy, and Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World*. It was written by James Davison Hunter, who is a theology professor at the University of Virginia. Hunter started a think tank there which studies American culture, including the religious landscape. That think tank is run by our own Dr. Ryan Olson, who is sitting with the Synodical Council. He serves as the representative for the North Atlantic district.

In this book Hunter states that it is only the gospel that creates faith. But he argues that one of the reasons the early church exploded the way it did is because believers did an excellent job at winning an audience for the gospel by living lives that were marked by compassion, generosity, kindness, and courage. I want to read an excerpt from the book.

(My thanks to Prof. Paul Wendland for recommending this book.)

(The excerpt, quoted in this slide, is found on page 253 of *To Change the World*.)

When you think about what Hunter is described—believers looking for ways to serve God and witness

for Christ in their local community—it is very similar to what we in Lutheranism call the Doctrine of Vocation.

TO
CHANGE
THE
WORLD

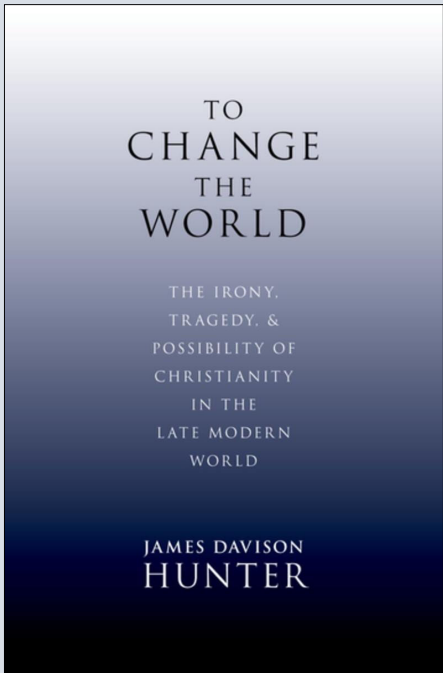
THE IRONY,
TRAGEDY, &
POSSIBILITY OF
CHRISTIANITY
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LATE MODERN
WORLD

JAMES DAVISON
HUNTER

It is here, through the joys, sufferings, hopes, disappointments, concerns, desires and worries of the people with whom we are in long-term and close relation – family, neighbors, coworkers, and community – where we find our authenticity as a body and as believers. It is here where we learn forgiveness and humility, hospitality, and charity, grow in patience and wisdom, and become clothed in compassion, gentleness, and joy.

(This quote is from page 253.)

Hunter says that where the church is “authentic”—by which he means it functions as God intended it to function—is when believers look for ways to serve the people that God brings into their circle of influence: family, neighbors, coworkers.



TO
CHANGE
THE
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THE IRONY,
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HUNTER

Pursuit, identification, the offer of life through sacrificial love – this is what God’s faithful presence means. It is a quality of commitment that is active, not passive; intentional, not accidental; **THE THEOLOGY OF THE CROSS** faithful presence invariably imposes costs. In this light, there is no true leadership without putting at risk one’s time, wealth, reputation, and position.

(These quotes come from page 243 and page 260.)

Hunter says that if Christians live like this, showing sacrificial love, it will invariably come with a cost. To take care of a neighbor’s physical needs might cost money. To try and meet a neighbor’s spiritual needs, by sharing the gospel with them, might bring ridicule and scorn. It could cost us reputation.

What do we call the teaching that following Christ will inevitably lead to hardship and sacrifice? Hunter is talking about the Theology of the Cross, without using those words.

Hunter’s premise in this book is that what he calls “the possibility of Christianity in the late modern world” is going to require Christians today to demonstrate the compassion, generosity and hospitality that were evident to all in the early church.



Acts 4:32

No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own, but they shared everything they had.

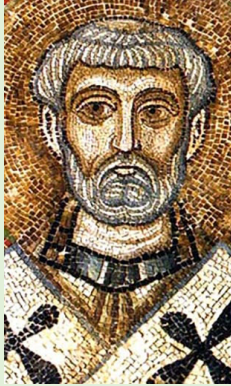
Acts 4:34

God's grace was so powerfully at work in them all that there were no needy persons among them.

2 Corinthians 8:3

For I testify that they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability.

You see this already in Scripture. Acts 4 talks about how in the family of believers, there was no one who was needy. In 2 Corinthians, Paul talks about how the Macedonians were so generous, they gave an offering that went beyond what seemed humanly reasonable... beyond what seemed fiscally sound.



CLEMENT, Bishop of Rome
c.a. 93AD

“He impoverishes himself out of love, so that he is certain he may never overlook a brother in need, especially if he knows he can bear poverty better than his brother. He likewise considers the pain of another as his own pain. And if he suffers any hardship because of having given out of his own poverty, he does not complain.”

Yet, it is not just during the time of the apostles we see this. Clement is one of the early Christian church fathers. At the time he writes this quote, all the apostles are dead except for perhaps St. John. Look at how Clement describes normal Christian behavior. Because the Christian understands the riches that await in heaven, he is able to give even if he himself is in poverty.



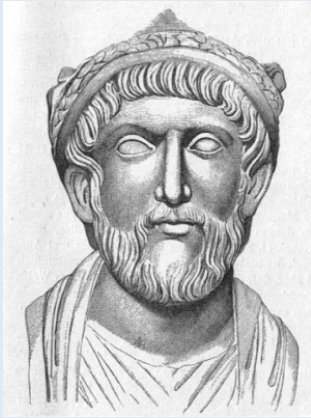
LUCIAN of SAMOSATA
The Death of Peregrinus; 165AD

The poor fools have persuaded themselves above all that they will live forever, from which it follows that they fear not death and many of them willingly undergo imprisonment. Moreover, their first lawgiver [that crucified sophist] taught them that they are all brothers of one another... So, they despise all things equally and regard them as common property... Accordingly, if any quack or trickster, who can press his advantage, comes among them he can acquire great wealth in a very short time by imposing on simple-minded people.

Let's fast forward to the end of the second century. All the apostles have been dead a long time. This quote is not by a Christian. Lucian was a pagan and a Syrian satirist. In his *Death of Peregrinus* he mocks Christians. But note at how he actually does a good job of stating Christian truth and the logical behavior of one who believes that truth.

He says that Christians believe "they will live forever." Therefore, the Christians Lucian saw were not afraid to die. They were willing to undergo persecution for their faith, because they believed they would live forever.

Lucian says that Christians believe it when "that crucified sophist" (Jesus) says that they are brothers and sisters. And so they act like it! Lucian noted the Christian did not treat one another as acquaintances, but as kin. They were willing to share anything they had with fellow Christians. More, they were willing to share what they had with anyone. So Lucian notes it is easy for con arts to take advantage of them.



EMPEROR JULIAN, “The Apostate” **c.a. 362AD**

These impious Galileans not only feed their own poor, but ours also. Welcoming them into their *agapae*, they attract them, as children are attracted with cakes... The hated Galileans devote themselves to works of charity, and by a display of false compassion have established and given effect to their pernicious efforts. See their love-feats, and their tables spread for the indigent. Such practice is common among them, and causes contempt for our gods.

Let's fast forward two more centuries, to the end of the 4th. Emperor Julian was a member of the Constantinian dynasty. He ruled from 361 to 363. He knew the empire was falling apart, and believed it was necessary to restore Roman values, including Hellenistic polytheism and Emperor worship, to keep the empire together. He saw Christianity as a threat to that goal. He even attempted to rebuild the Jewish temple in what seems to be an effort to promote Judaism over Christianity.

Eventually, Julian came to realize that he wouldn't be able to squash Christianity. Part of it was due to a plague that spanned almost his entire short reign. Pagans left the city (and their sick loved ones) behind. Christians stayed and set up what could be considered early hospitals. They took care of Christian and pagan sick alike. Julian saw all this, and he realized Christians were here to stay.

Notice his contempt for Christians. What is bothering him? They “feed not only their own poor, but ours too.” They “devote themselves to works of charity.” They take care of the indigent, i.e. the poor.

None of this generosity and compassion converted anyone. Only the gospel of Christ – his life, death, and resurrection – can create faith. Kindness, love, charity, hospitality... those cannot create faith. But they can win an audience. They can lead people to wonder what makes you tick. Dr. Hunter argues that's what we need today, Christians to live in a way that makes others wonder what makes us tick.




MATTHEW 5:14-16

“You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and **glorify your Father in heaven.**”

Jesus himself taught this. “Let your light shine before men.” I sometimes have heard people refer to this as lifestyle witnessing. But note that Jesus says the goal is not just to live a beautiful life. The goal is to get people to “glorify your Father in heaven.” And what did Jesus teach about coming to the Father? You can’t do it without faith in the Son! There is no such thing as lifestyle witnessing that does not include sharing the gospel. Yes, we are to witness with our deeds. But the goal is to win an audience so that we might share Christ.

by the power of the Spirit...



We will strive to create a compelling Christian community, one that even the spiritually dead can perceive as beautiful and beneficial.

Secular humanism and religious pluralism says that Christianity is nothing special... that Christians are just like the followers of every other religion... that Christians are no different than non-religious people. How do we combat that? With the strength the Spirit gives us, we demonstrate with our compassion and generosity and hospitality that isn't true.

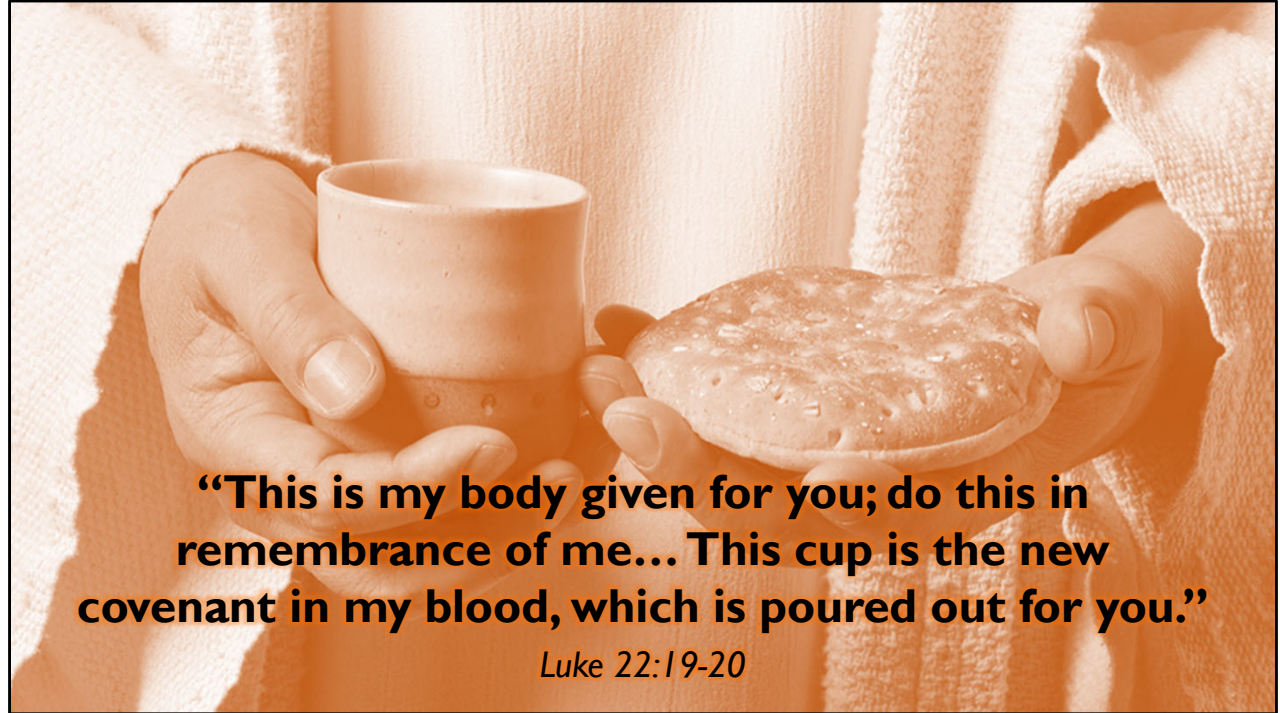
Now, how does this play out in the 21st century. This is not 2nd century Rome. The government has set up programs to feed the poor. There are hospitals in every small town. What is there left for us to do? Plenty. I can't get into it now. But I would encourage you to pick up the booklet *Love in Action*, produced by WELS Commission on Special Ministries. It will give your congregation ideas about how you might reflect the love of Christ through compassion ministry in a way that fits your community, so that you might win an audience for the gospel.

KEY QUESTION

What are the spiritual benefits and blessings which a congregation can offer that cannot be obtained online?




Remember, I asked you to consider this question. If people can hear a good sermon online and listen to their favorite hymns on Spotify, why would they need to be part of your congregation? That's our next key question. What are the blessings a congregation can offer that cannot be obtained online. I believe there are two.



One thing is the sacrament. Someone might say, “I don’t need to go to church to be close to God. I can read my Bible at home by myself or pray when I’m going for a walk through the woods.” That is true enough. But you can’t partake of the very body and blood by which your forgiveness was wrought at home by yourself. That is a special blessing that we receive when two or three gather together in Christ’s name.

by the power of the Spirit...



**We will better teach and emphasize
the blessing of Holy Communion,
something not enjoyed apart from
the assembly of the saints.**

It is so easy for our sinful nature to turn Holy Communion into just another church rite, something we might even stumble through mindlessly, something maybe we even rush through. We need to better teach the blessing of Holy Communion. We must stress the union of earthly and heavenly elements. We must stress the union of Christ and sinner. But we must also better stress the union that is confirmed and strengthened among the family of God, assembled around his table.



That directly ties into the second thing we need to stress as a blessing of being part of church – Christian community.

BE DEVOTED TO ONE ANOTHER

Romans 12:10

HAVE CONCERN FOR ONE ANOTHER

1 Corinthians 12:25

SERVE ONE ANOTHER THROUGH LOVE

1 Corinthians 16:20

BE KIND TO ONE ANOTHER

Ephesians 4:32

CONFESS YOUR SINS TO ONE ANOTHER

James 4:11

When you read through Paul's epistles, you constantly come across "one another" passages. In those passages, St. Paul is stressing that Christian care in a congregation is not supposed to be just something that happens between pastor and member. Members of a congregation need one another.

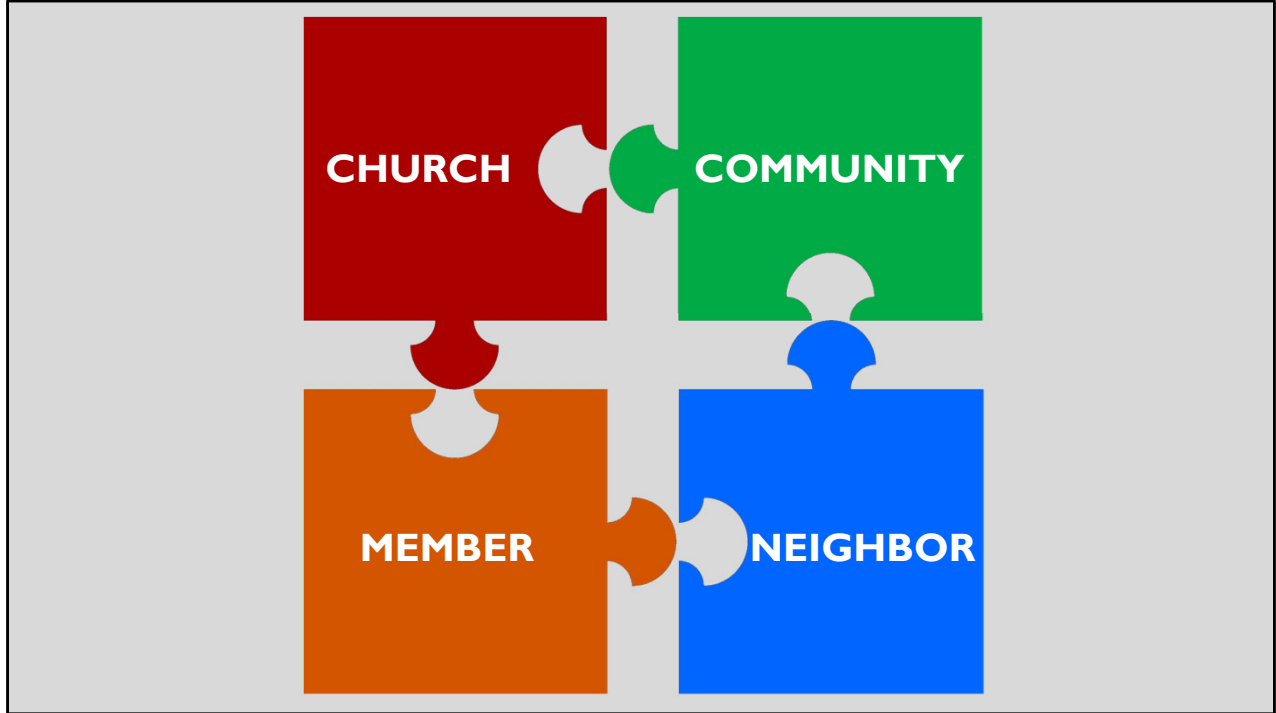
We are not hardwired to be rugged individuals. We need each other. You need to have a circle of Christian friends to encourage you when necessary, comfort you when necessary, teach you when necessary, and, yes, rebuke you when necessary. We need people who love us to hold us accountable for our Christian life. You need that. I need that. That's Christian community. You can't get that if you pull away from a congregation.

Developing a sense of Christian community is absolutely vital when it comes to the efforts of retaining and gaining our young members. Study after study has demonstrated that these generations, in spite of all their friends on social media, actually feel extremely isolated and lonely. They are looking for an authentic community to which they might belong, love and be loved, and find purpose. That is exactly what a Christian congregation should be!



This is a clip of a news story about a Christian congregation in Canada that is focused on retaining and gaining young people, and the Lord seems to be blessing their efforts. Note that it is the young people who say that while the one hour on Sunday morning is important, they are looking for something from their church the other 167 hours of the week. The pastor then draws the conclusion, that it is a temptation to over focus on things like worship style. While that one hour is important, what is infinitely more important in retaining and gaining young members is that the congregation is a loving Christian community.

You know that in many WELS congregations there is a culture where people arrive 2 minutes before church. They are in the parking lot about 45 seconds after the closing hymn. Members might know one another and say hi, perhaps even greeting one another by name. But if we are being honest, most of the members are just acquaintances of one another. If that's the case, then the only thing your congregation provides is spiritual content. And if *that's* the case, your young members can just as easily get fed spiritually by going online. Creating a culture of Christian community is going to be vital moving forward.



The top part of this graph illustrates the way we have traditionally approached ministry. We have attempted to connect the church to the community... to connect an institution to a group of people. We have put up billboards advertising our church and/or school to the community. We have sent out mass mailings. We have canvassed. We run an add in the newspaper. Perhaps we try and offer a ministry we think will serve a broad segment of the community, like a preschool.

I call that *corporate* outreach. It is an effort of the institution (the congregation) to connect with the community. There will always be a place for that. I'm not suggesting we *stop* doing those things. I'm saying that, due to the direction culture is going, that may not be enough.

Moving forward, I think our strategy must include training and encouraging our members to better connect with the unbelievers and unchurched that God brings into their lives. We need to strive to connect not just church to community, but members of our church to members within the community. People to people.

Here's an analogy that is going to limp somewhat. Imagine you are trying to convince me to get into boating. So you say to me, "Jon, I understand why you wouldn't like this old-fashioned, rickety boat. But here is a modern boat. Here is a contemporary boat. Here is a boat for people who didn't know they needed to be on a boat." That might work if I was inclined to consider take up boating. However, what if I thought that boating was a waste of time? What if I thought that boating was irrelevant? What if I thought that people who were into boating tended to be snooty and elitist? You can upgrade your boat all you want. I'm still going to have nothing to do with it.

In this analogy, the boat is the church. You can tell your community, “You are going to love our worship. We have a Christian preschool where your kids get to know about Jesus. We have the best coffee in town. And our pastor is such a wonderful preacher.” That might work if most Americans were inclined to join a church. But what if, more and more, people think worship is pointless. What if they want their kids in a safe preschool, but don’t care at all if their child learns about Jesus? What if they think preaching is generally irrelevant? And on top of all that, there are three Starbucks in town. We *must* conduct our outreach efforts in a way that we are trying to reach more than just people who might be inclined to consider going to church, because as I’ve hopefully demonstrated, that is a smaller and smaller segment of America.

Now, let’s say you are my next door neighbor. You invite me over for dinner. We become friends. I can tell you care for me, cause you show it by your actions. And one day you say, “Jon, I’d love to take you out on my boat this weekend.” I might say, “Eh, I don’t know. I think boating is pointless.” You respond, “Really? Jon, boating is fantastic. I find it so peaceful to be on the water. I think if you’d try it, you would love it.” I’m going to try it. It won’t be because I think boating is great. I’ll try it because you have been my friend.

As we equip our members to befriend their neighbors and coworkers... to invest the time to get close to those people... the Spirit will create opportunities for us them to share the gospel. As our members invite those people to church, they will consider it. It might be that they still think church is irrelevant, yet they will accept the invitation simply because their good friend asked them. And there, gathered around the Word, the Spirit has another opportunity to do his good work.



AUTHENTIC LOVE

Hebrews 13:2

Do not forget to show hospitality (φιλοξενίας) to strangers.

Luke 16:9

I tell you, use worldly wealth (μαμωνᾶ τῆς ἀδικίας) to gain friends (ποιήσατε φίλους) for yourselves, so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings.

This cannot be fake. Our members must be moved by Christ to genuinely love these people they are befriending. The writer to the Hebrews encourages us, “Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers.” The Greek word for hospitality literally means “the love of strangers.” The Greek word for love there describes friendly love, i.e. affection.

I think our people sometimes confuse hospitality with entertaining. Entertaining can easily become all about you. You have people over, and part of your goal is to show people a beautifully set table, serve them a delicious meal, get them to say, “This was such a wonderful time.” But hospitality is all about the other person. You are striving to get to know them, attempting to learn how you can serve them as a way of serving Jesus Christ.

In Luke 16, Jesus tells the parable of the shrewd manger. It is a fascinating parable. There is a servant who serves something as an accountant for his master. He knows his master is going to fire him. And so this accountant begins to go to the people who owe his master money and slashing their bill. Why? He is trying to win friends. He knows that he is going to be fired, and he’s hoping that these new friends will be able to help him out when he’s unemployed. After the parable, Jesus makes the point that unbelievers are typically better than believers at using money to accomplish their goals. Jesus then makes this application. “Use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves.” But here is where the Christian differs than the unbeliever. In the parable, the unbeliever used wealth to make friends for personal, selfish reasons. Jesus tells us to use our wealth to gain friends because we are aware that there are “eternal dwellings.”

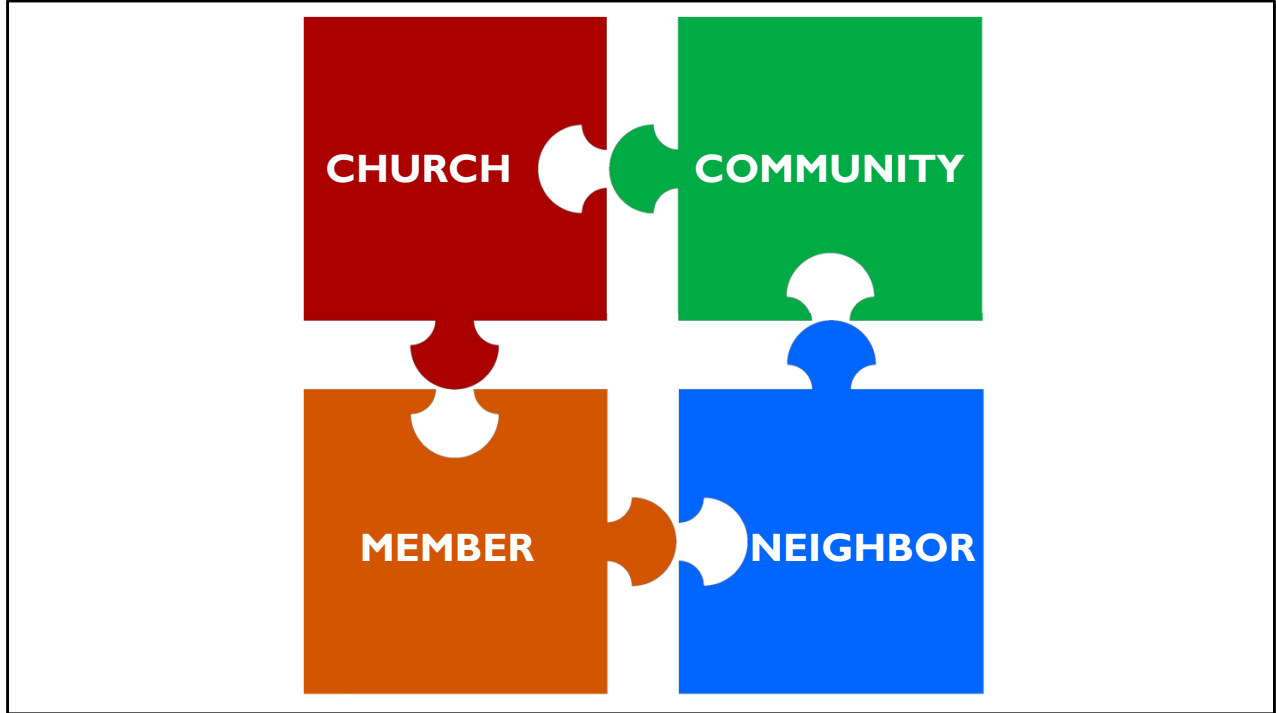
We know that there is a place called heaven... Paradise restored. We know there is also someplace else

one might spend eternity. We want as many people as possible to spend eternity in Paradise, and not the other place. And so Jesus says, "Then make friends! Spend some of your money in a way that you gain friends, so that you can tell them about me."

What is the connection between hospitality and evangelism?

This video as found here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZDWJgoe7NfA>.

It is produced by the Gospel Coalition, a group of Evangelicals that have set some aggressive goals in the effort to turn around the decline of their congregations. One of the cornerstones of their strategy is training and encouraging members to practice hospitality as part of a broader evangelism effort.



Again, I'm not saying there is not a place for corporate outreach. There is and always will be. I'm saying that given the direction our culture is going, that effort of connecting our Christian member to their unchristian neighbor, coworker, or family member is going to be key.

It's good if you mail out 15,000 postcards every year. It is great if you run targeted Facebook ads, inviting people to worship services. It is ok if you want to spend \$20,000 on a LED church sign, I guess. But what if you tried this. Start with your leadership: pastor, church council, elders. Have each of them talk to their wives about setting aside one day a week – Tuesday, Saturday, whatever – to have one of their neighbors over for dinner. They need to be trained for this. It's not that they should feel the need to say, "Now, before dessert, let's have a Bible study." They don't even need to necessarily bring up church at that first dinner. Just practice hospitality. Have them over again maybe six or seven weeks later. Have them over again to do something else: play some cards, watch the big game. Have all your leadership do that for five or six different couples from the neighborhood. See what fruits the Holy Spirit brings from that after a year. See what opportunities he creates for spiritual conversations or invitations to worship. It's up to the Spirit. But I would not be surprised if after a year, he accomplished substantially more through an effort like that than through your mass mailings or LED sign.



**We know 9% of WELS congregations
had their historic high Christmas Eve attendance.**

In Congregational Services, in the programs and initiatives we roll out in future years, you will see this emphasis on connecting individuals to individuals.

Take the C18 program, our Christmas Eve evangelism effort from last year. The primary strategy of that effort was to have members produce what we called “a personal mission field,” a list of 20 people they know who the member believes does not have a church home. They prayed about those 20 people throughout Advent. Then, about two weeks before Christmas Eve, those members would phone those people and ask if they wanted to join them for Christmas Eve worship.

We conducted an exit survey after C18. We only heard from about 24% of WELS congregations. (That’s normal for an exit survey.) But through that survey, we heard of approximately 120 congregations that said they had their highest Christmas Eve attendance ever. That’s a substantial amount of our synod! What was different from previous outreach efforts? The *primary* focus was on having members trying to reach out to neighbors. We still did a mass mailing. We provided a video and instructions on how to do a target Facebook ad. But those were done to *supplement* and *support* the personal invitations shared by our members.

C19 is an outreach effort that will do the same. So will E20, and Easter outreach effort. They will all strive to have members produce a list of people they are going to attempt to invite to church.

GROUPS

Primary aim:

- knitting people together

Types:

- Growth Groups (Bible study)
- Help Groups (church and/or community service)
- Play Groups (recreational fellowship)



This concept of better connecting people to people is not only vital to evangelism efforts. It is vital to our assimilation and retention efforts. I talked about the need to create a Christian community. Many WELS congregations are using small groups to do this.

In reality, every church already has small groups. There are the four old guys who play Sheepshead each Friday night. There are the eight ladies who get together every other week to do whatever it is they do. You already have small groups.

Next year, the Commission on Discipleship will release a program that helps your congregation think through how to systematize this. You need to understand the primary goal of small groups. I think people often believe the primary goal must always be Bible study. No, it doesn't. It certainly can be. You can have Growth Groups where facilitators who have been trained by the pastor help lead discussion on some portion of Scripture or perhaps the most recent sermon. However, it is fine if a small group gets together for something else too. Perhaps there is a group of members who serve at a homeless shelter twice a month. Perhaps it's simply members getting together for recreational fellowship. That's fine! Because the primary goal of small groups is simply to knit people together into that Christian community... to turn acquaintances into friends.

LUKE 15:4-6

“Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Doesn’t he leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it? ⁵ And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders ⁶ and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbors together and says, ‘Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.’”



Finally, we are going to emphasize this person to person connection when it comes to our efforts to go after the straying.

The way the average WELS congregation typically approaches delinquency is a perfect illustration of a focus on the institution rather than the individual. Everyone here at this convention probably belongs to a church that tracks attendance. You can tell me, “We had 345 people in worship last Sunday.” Who cares! That number really doesn’t matter. What matters is the names of all the people who *weren’t* there. You need to know who has been absent for period of time. And Christian love would dictate that is done in a manner better than the elders sitting down once a month and saying, “Well, who haven’t we seen in awhile.” Attendance should be tracked. There needs to be a system in place. Most importantly, there needs to be an individual connection. When Bill has been gone for four weeks, there needs to be *someone* who knows it is their personal responsibility to, in love, pursue Bill before he is lost forever.

Last month, on welscongregationalservices.net, we uploaded a video based elder training program. It allows pastors and current or future elders to think through the best way to approach dealing with delinquency in their context. But it stresses this focus on personal connections.

by the power of the Spirit...

- We will help our members see the face of Christ in their neighbor. We will encourage them to build authentic friendships with those currently outside the Church. Hospitality will be a core value among us.
- We will do whatever is necessary to knit our members into something more than acquaintances. They will have a family.
- We will zealously, almost recklessly, pursue the straying.

In summary, we must help people see that while, yes, they can watch sermons on YouTube and listen to hymns on Spotify, there are incredible blessings to be a part of a Christian community. It gives you a spiritual family whose love and fellowship you will enjoy for all of time.

KEY QUESTION

In the generations to come, how do we position ourselves strategically to conduct the most aggressive ministry possible?



The previous questions were meant to get us to wrestling with the changing American religious culture. This question relates to our WELS culture.

TO ASK IT ANOTHER WAY...

- There was a time when culture dictated we needed one church every 4 to 6 miles. That is not the case any longer. What best serves Christ's mission of reaching the lost now?
- There was a time when the culture allowed for us to adopt a one-church / one-elementary school paradigm. That rarely is the case any longer. What would best serve Christ's mission of discipling our children now?



It's fascinating when you look at a map showing our congregations in portions of Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Michigan. You will have churches clustered tightly together, maybe only 4 or 5 miles apart, sometimes even less. Why? In many cases, those congregations were started when people went to church by horse and buggy. 5 miles is about all you want to go traveling that way!

The same holds true with schools. When I was a child, I walked to Lutheran elementary school. Today, that's not very common.

We need to wrestle with this. We have a lot of situations where in a small geographic area – let's say a square 8 miles by 8 miles – you have four or five or six congregations. Often, a good number of those congregations have been in a long term decline. In some cases, it's simply because they are located in a highly rural area. The family owned farm is becoming extremely rare. So we now have congregations where, unless we are going to start baptizing cows, there is no mission field.

What serves the Kingdom better? Is it better for us to have a bunch of small congregation in close proximity to one another? Or might it be better for those congregations to merge into one larger church? I could ask the same question about schools.

There is almost always an economy of scale. Operating three schools of 30 kids each is *substantially* more expensive than operating one school of 90 kids. On top of that, when small congregations and/or schools merge, the new entity has a broader diversity of gifts. They are able to do ministry they perhaps couldn't do before, just because of the increase of gifts in human resources (both called workers and volunteerism).

I'm not saying it is *always* best that congregations in close proximity merge. I am saying that Jesus deserves that we think this through, i.e. what would best serve his mission.

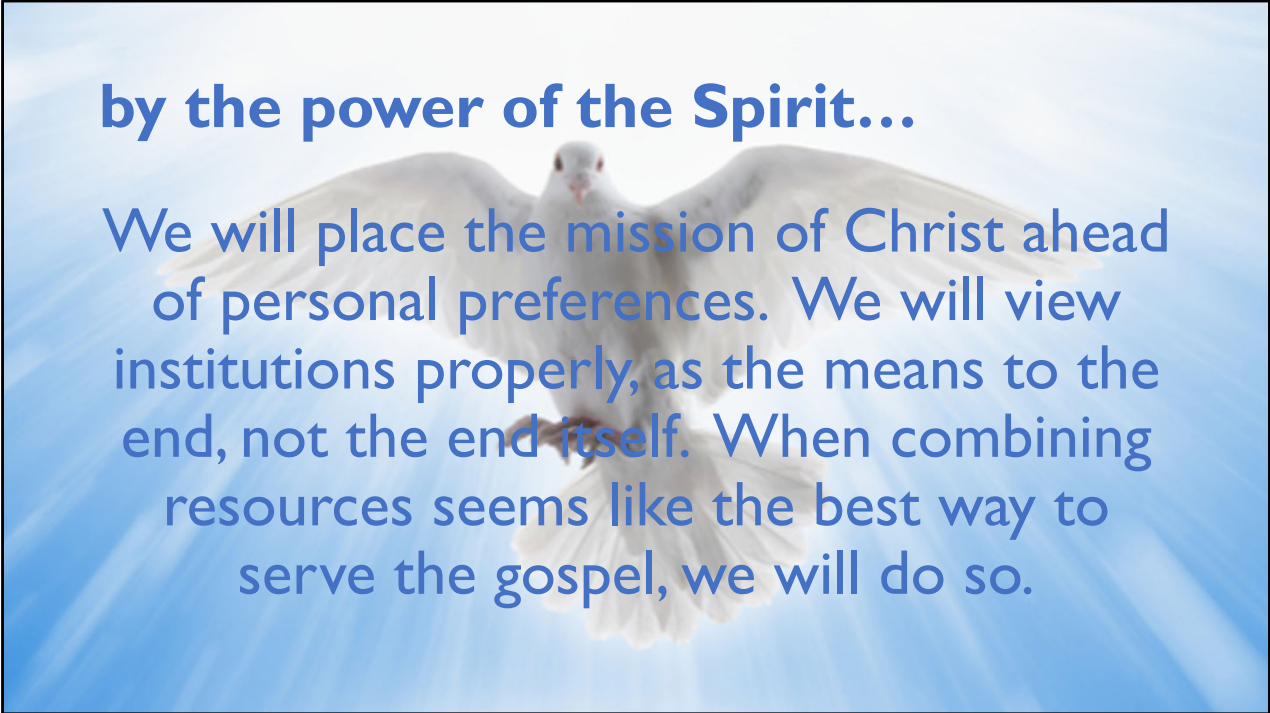
When I've worked with groups of congregations that are considering it, there generally are two obstacles. It's not logistics. Merging congregations is not that logistically difficult. There needs to be some planning. There are some legal issues to work through. But that part really isn't that hard.

The first obstacle that can pop up is emotional irrationality. We discuss a merge which will result in an old congregation liquidating its resources. Someone says, "But my grandpa Joe helped build that steeple!" An individual like that simply needs someone to lovingly walk them through how irrational that viewpoint is. "So let me get this straight. When Jesus comes on the Last Day and raises your grandpa Joe to take him to Paradise, you think your grandpa Joe is instead going to be upset. 'What happened to my steeple!?!?' The very steeple which, if it were still around, the angels would be about to set on fire. Do you really think that is how your grandpa Joe would feel?" I intend that to be a humorous example, but it illustrates the point. We need to lovingly help people overcome the emotional irrationality that would prevent a merger which could result in better mission efforts.

The second obstacle that can occur is simply sinful selfishness. People want what they want. They want what they are comfortable with. They might rather just stay at their church until it declines into nonexistence rather than merge and be part of a new mission effort. The way that is dealt with is through the law and gospel. People need to understand that it's not really their church, in the sense that they don't own it. It's Christ's church. He is the one who purchased it with his blood. To oppose an effort to advance his mission simply because it makes you uncomfortable is spiritually unhealthy.

Don't get me wrong. I'm not saying it's a *bad* thing for someone to love the congregation where they were confirmed. It's not bad to have a fondness for the pulpit from which God's life-giving Word has been shared with you for many years. It's *beautiful* that you appreciate those things! But we must never confuse the means with the end. The end... the ultimate goal... is the glory of Jesus Christ through the carrying out of his mission. A congregation is a means to that end. If the end is served by a congregation staying open, may God bless their efforts. But if the mission of the church might be best served by one congregation merging with another, then may the Spirit move the saints of those churches to embrace that, even though that effort comes with a bit of personal pain.

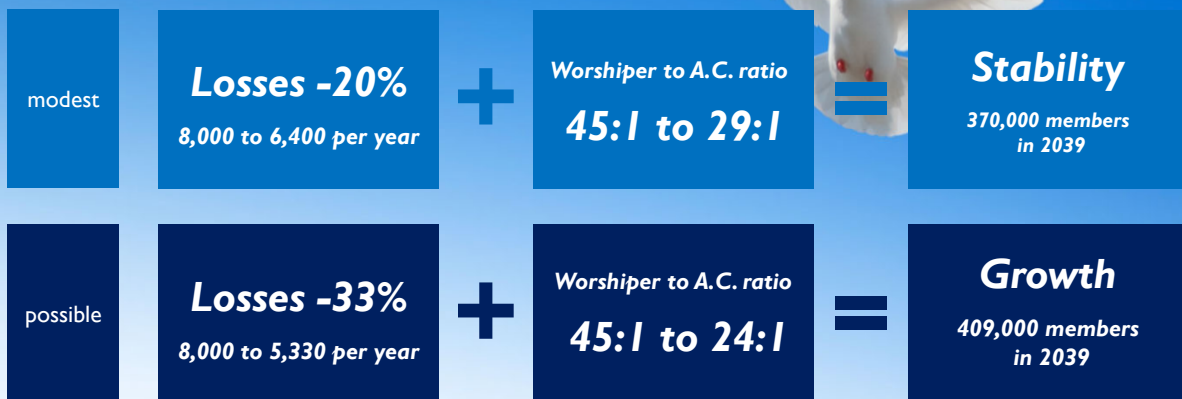
by the power of the Spirit...



We will place the mission of Christ ahead of personal preferences. We will view institutions properly, as the means to the end, not the end itself. When combining resources seems like the best way to serve the gospel, we will do so.

Note that I have the phrase “seems like the best way to serve the gospel.” Someone may argue, “Ultimately, only God knows what would best serve the gospel.” That is absolutely true. But it also true that God does not treat us as little children, telling us exactly what we must do in every situation. Instead, he gives us the privilege of using our God given wisdom to try and determine the best way to conduct ministry. God did not tell us exactly how to structure the way we open home missions. The Scripture does not tell us how to conduct worker training. We operate those ministries the way we do because it *seems best*. If we say we can’t try something like a church merger because only God knows what would best serve the gospel, we are saying we can’t try anything.

If we would increase gospel efforts and the Spirit were to bless it..



What I've shared are steps we might take to do three things: feed the faithful, reach the lost, pursue the straying. Those are all ways that we sow the seed of the gospel. But that is all we do – sow. The growth is up to the Spirit. That is true of spiritual growth or statistical growth. It is his work. However, he does his work as the Church shares the gospel. So, we concern ourselves with doing all that we can with the gospel in those areas – feeding the faithful, reaching the lost, pursuing the straying. But we leave the results of those efforts up to him.

What if the Spirit would bless our increased gospel efforts? What I hope to illustrate this slide is if the Spirit would grant just modest blessings, over time it changes things drastically.

I mentioned how over the last 30 years, we have lost on average about 8,000 people out the back door. These are people who quit the church or join another Christian church. Imagine we increase our efforts to prevent that. We equip our congregations to train more elders and give them a system to address delinquency quickly. We teach apologetics to our kids, preparing them to face the secular humanism and religious pluralism we talked about. We do a better job of building a Christian community within the church, knitting members together into a family. Imagine we tried all these efforts. Now, imagine the Holy Spirit blesses that modestly. Through our increased gospel efforts, the Spirit cuts losses by 20%. Instead of losing 8,000 a year, we lose 6,400 members out the back door annually. (In the Church Militant, that is always going to happen.) That does not sound that drastic, does it—a 20% decline in losses? Again, it's 100% up to the Spirit. But it is something we could pray for and work towards.

Now imagine that we also increase our evangelism efforts. Currently, on average in WELS, for every 45 worshipers we have 1 adult confirmation. But imagine we all better equipped our members to share

their faith, so they are comfortable turning conversations spiritual. We encourage them to practice hospitality. We stress the importance of members inviting their unchurched friends and neighbors to attend church with them. Imagine the Holy Spirit blessed those efforts. Through our efforts, the Holy Spirit brought more to faith... convinced more to join our congregations. Imagine the Spirit enabled that ratio of worshipers to adult confirmations to reach 29:1. Again, that is up to the Holy Spirit. But it doesn't seem like it's unrealistic. If 29 regularly attending members had all had a list of unchurched friends and family, that would be... what?... 300 to 400 people perhaps. If those 29 people would be encouraging one another in their evangelism efforts, does it seem unrealistic that they 29 of them might convince 1 in those 400 to join a congregation? I will say it once again. That is ultimately up to the Holy Spirit. I'm simply saying if we increased our evangelism efforts in the manner I've described, it does not seem unrealistic that the Spirit might grant that blessing.

If, by five years from now, those two things would happen—losses decline 20% and we have a worshiper to adult confirmation ratio of 29 to 1—twenty years from now, we would have approximately 370,000 members, over 20,000 more than we do now. We'd be stable.

In the bottom row, I have a second scenario, a little more aggressive, but still reasonable. Imagine through our efforts the Holy Spirit cut our losses by one third and increased adult confirmations to a 24 to 1 ratio. That is up to the Spirit! But, if he would bless our work so we achieved those goals by five years from now, in twenty years we would be well over 400,000 members again.

I'm being perhaps being overly repetitive, but I want to make it certain that we always remember that all growth, spiritual or statistical, is the work of the Spirit. I also want us to remember that the Spirit works through us as we do all we can with the gospel. All this slide is meant to illustrate is that if the Spirit would choose to bless our efforts, it would take only modest blessings for the statistical decline of WELS to turn around.

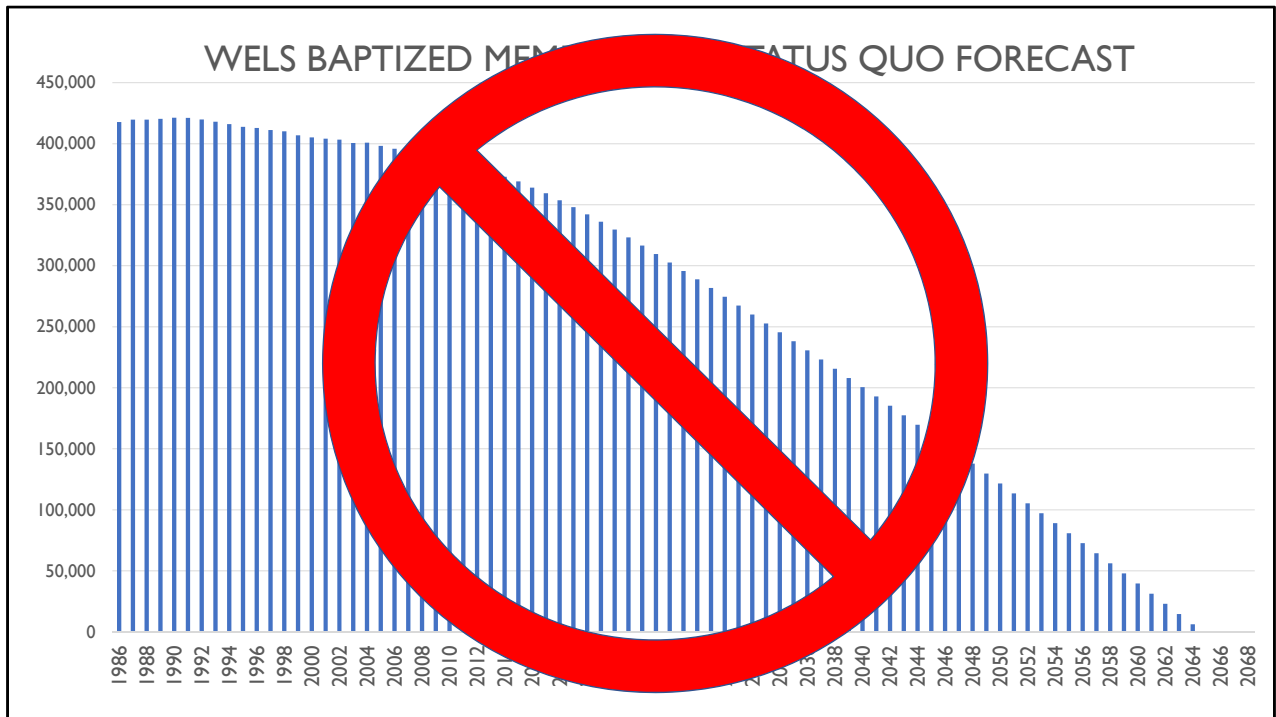
This simply illustrates it would not take much for WELS to "right the ship." The Spirit would need to bless increased efforts to retain the straying and reach the lost. But not by much. Cutting losses by a third... That seems reasonable through better elder work and better assimilation work with college kids. Having a ratio of 24 worshipers to one adult confirmation... We have districts where the average is 19 to 1. We have churches where the average is 6 to 1. **THIS CAN BE DONE!** It is up to the Spirit. However, the Spirit works through our efforts. If we do NOT increase our efforts, it is probably being unreasonable to think things will turn around.

And if we DO increase our efforts, the losses may still continue. But at least they will continue with us knowing we were doing all we could with the gospel. This leads to the final point.

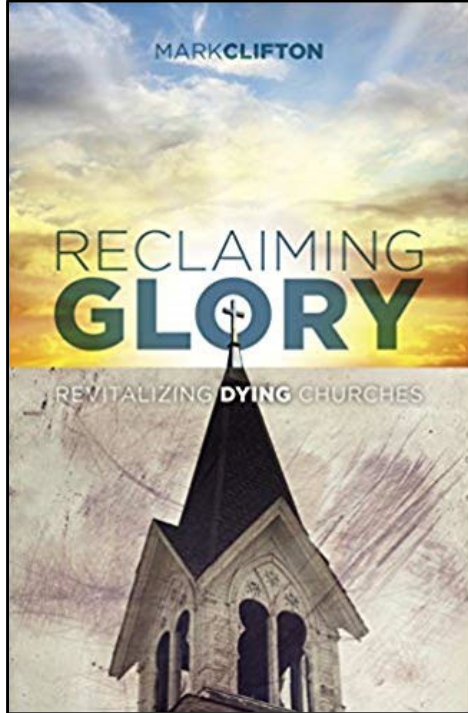


These are some difficult things I've laid out. Talking to others about our faith... That is something that can be scary. It is for me. Practicing hospitality... If you are an introvert, that might be a challenge. Going after straying members... They often get testy, especially when you point out sin. Merging churches... I said that can be emotionally painful.

Therefore, the last thing we need to talk about... the most important thing... is our motivation for doing all these difficult things.



This should *not* be our motivation—fear of decline. I share the stats, not to motivate anyone, but simply to clarify reality. Again, God gives us the privilege of using our God-given reason to try and decide the best way to approach ministry. You cannot make good decisions without good information. So, I share those stats to help with decision making. But it is not motivation!



You will never be able to guilt longtime members of the church into making sacrifices for the sake of the gospel. If you find yourself tempted to go down that road, stop it. Guilt is an awful motivator for ministry... Telling the elderly saints of the church that if they don't change the church will die may change their behavior in the short term (though even this is doubtful), but it will never warm their hearts toward the gospel and make long-term changes in their lives and the life of the church.

From Mark Clifton's *Reclaiming Glory: Revitalizing Dying Churches*, pages 55, 56.

Nor can guilt be our motivation. Mark Clifton wrote a book titled *Reclaiming Glory: Revitalizing Dying Churches*. Not everything he says in there would we agree with. But he does a fantastic job of driving home the point that guilt is not a good motivator. At best, it motivates people only in the short term. But even then, it does not produce the joyful service that Christ desires. So we will not guilt anyone into attempting to increase gospel efforts.



MATTHEW 28:19,20

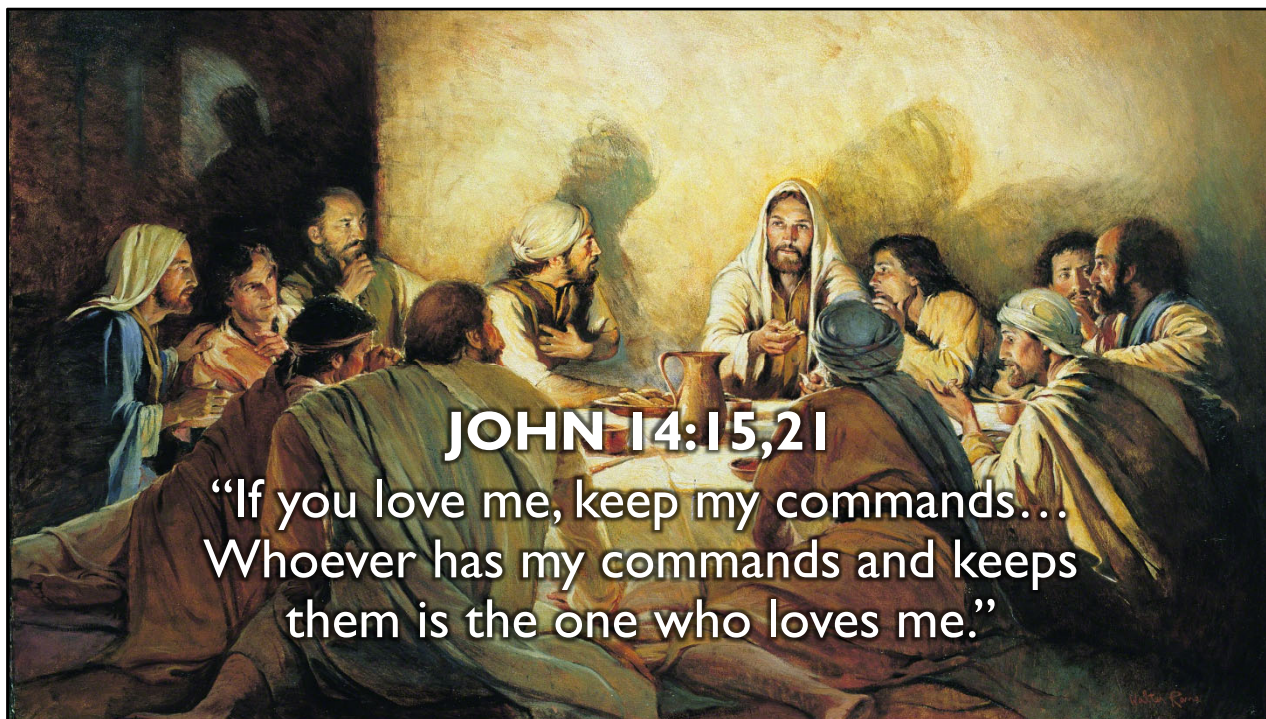
Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.

I'm not sure this is what motivates us either. Is the Great Commission law or gospel? If you say that it's law, I won't quibble. It is an imperative. It is a direction our God gives to us.

It could also be considered one of those imperatives that isn't exactly law, but instead is an impossible command that God gives and then, for his glory, also gives the person the ability to do the impossible. So, Jesus says, "Lazarus, come out!" He gives an impossible command, because Lazarus has been dead and in the grave for four days. But then in giving that command, Jesus also, for his own glory, gives Lazarus the ability to do what he's told to do. We could perhaps view the Great Commission that way.

What you can't call the Great Commission is gospel. It's bookended by the gospel: Christ's promise to be with us always; Christ's promise to use his authority for our well-being. But the Great Commission itself is not gospel.

The Great Commission gives us our mission. It tells us why the Church on earth exists. But it does not give us the motivation to attempt to fulfill that mission. What does?



In the upper room, Jesus told his followers who it is that will be motivated to do what Jesus asks. It is the one who loves him. How will we achieve the motivation to do the hard things we may have to do in our efforts to meet the challenges before our church? We need the Holy Spirit to increase our love for Jesus.

LUKE 7:41-43

“Two people owed money to a certain moneylender. One owed him five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. Neither of them had the money to pay him back, so he forgave the debts of both. Now which of them will love him more?”

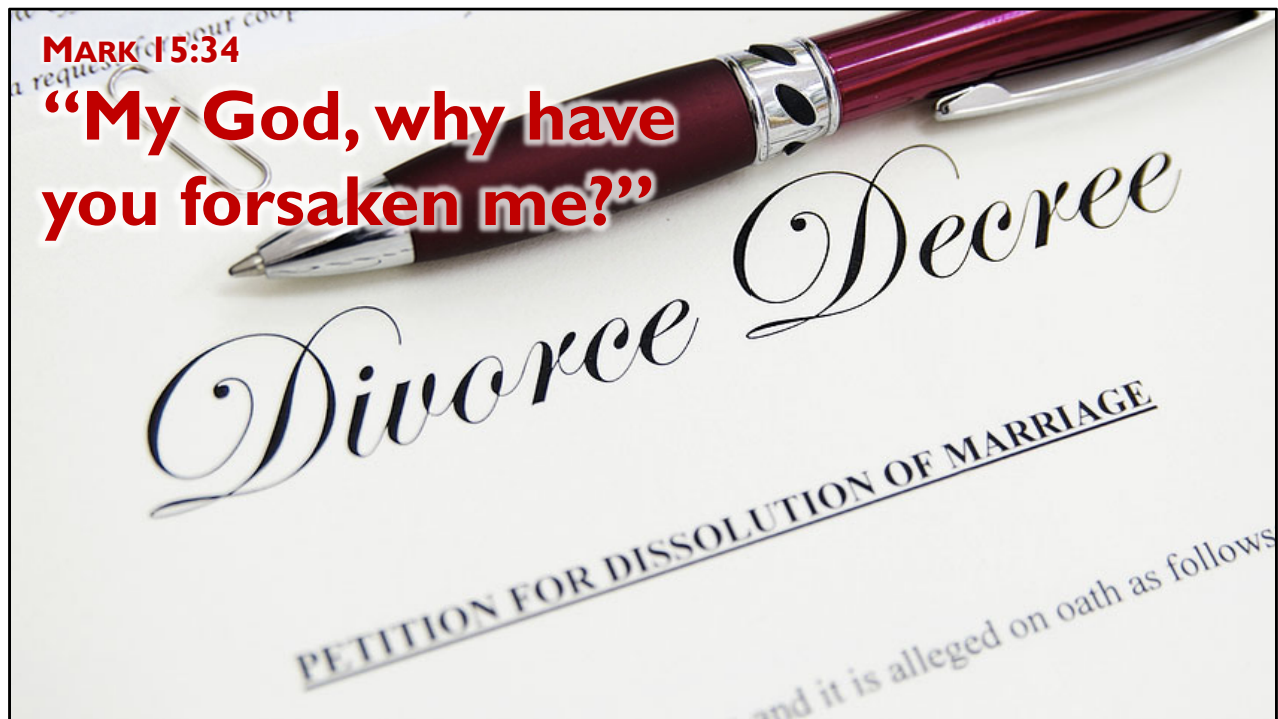
Simon replied, “I suppose the one who had the bigger debt forgiven.”

“You have judged correctly,” Jesus said.



How does that increase in love for Jesus happen? We see an example in Luke 7. Jesus is having dinner at the home of Simon, a Pharisee. Somehow, a woman “who had lived a sinful life” gets in. She falls at Jesus’ feet. She is sobbing uncontrollably, drenching Jesus feet. He anoints his feet with perfume. She wipes Jesus’ feet with her hair. Simon sees this and finds it distasteful. So Jesus tells a parable of a moneylender who forgave the debts of two people. One debt was ten times larger than the other. Jesus asked, “Simon, which of them will love the moneylender more?” Simon replied, “I suppose the one who had the bigger debt forgiven.” I suppose? *Of course* that is the one who will love the moneylender more!

Jesus point: the one who loves him much is the one who knows he has been forgiven much. If we are going to be motivated to do the hard things Christ has called us to do, we need to know we have been forgiven much. We need to grow in our appreciation of the *immensity* and the *intimacy* of our forgiveness.



The immensity of our forgiveness...

When thinking about the payment for sins, it is easy for our minds to go to the physical aspects of Christ's torture: the scourge, the crown of thorns, the nails through the hands and feet. Brothers and sisters, that was the *easy* part of the payment for sins. Don't get me wrong. That had to be excruciating painful. But crucifixion was not uncommon. Others suffered like that. But Jesus suffered like no one else ever will. To understand the immensity of his payment, you need to focus on the emotional and spiritual torture he endured.

There is pain experienced when a relationship breaks apart. The amount of pain is directly proportional to the closeness and the duration of the relationship.

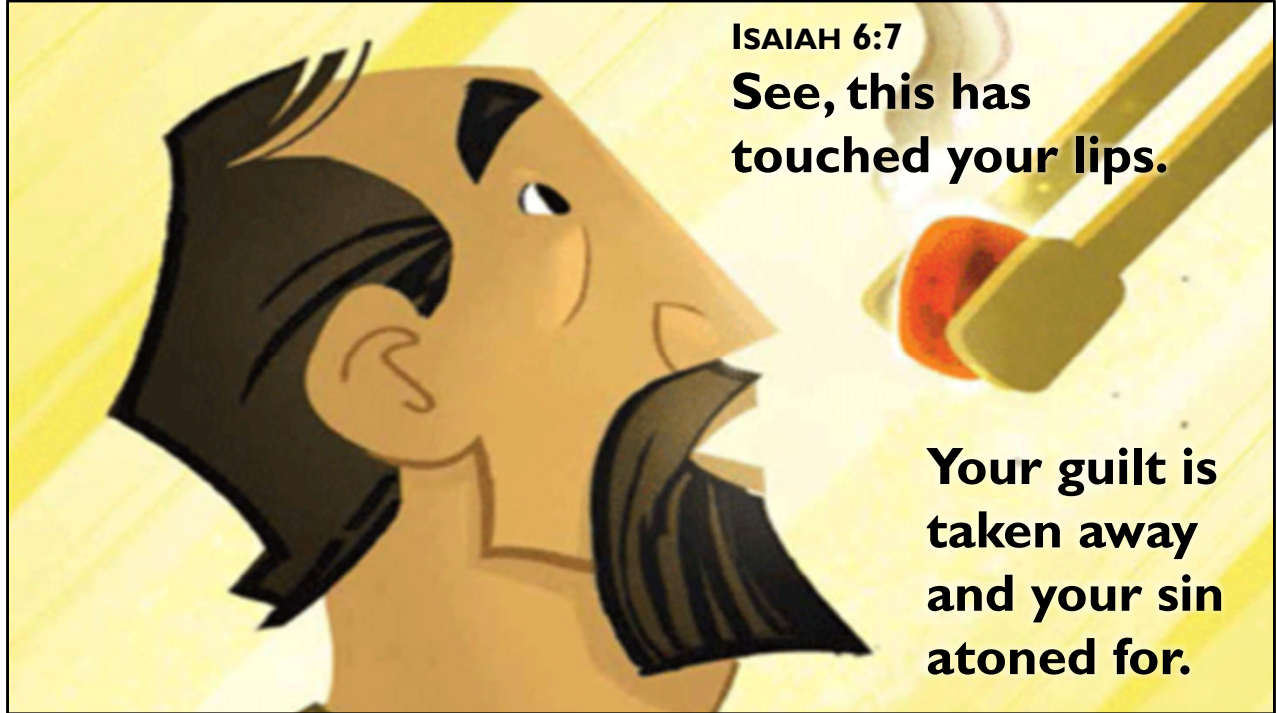
So, there are many of you here today that I have never met. Imagine one of you comes up to me later tonight and you say, "Jon, I have measured you and found you wanting. I want nothing to do with you ever again." That will hurt. I'll be bothered. As I drive back to Milwaukee on Thursday, I'll be thinking about that. But I'll probably be able to let it go by the time I reach the Wisconsin border. Because we were never personally that close, and we have not known each other that long. So the pain of you wanting nothing to do with me would be mitigated.

There are also delegates here I have known since we were children... since we were young and dumb. (Now we're just dumb.) Imagine if one of those long-time friends comes up to me after conference and said, "Jon, I'm done with you. I don't ever want to see you or talk to you again." I think that would take years for me to get over. It would hurt so badly!

Now imagine that after my six-hour drive home, I pull into my driveway, and in front of my house are all my belongings, packed up. My wife is standing there with divorce papers. She says to me, "Jon, I've decided I don't want to have anything to do with you. We are done." Ohhhh! That would unmake me as a man! I don't think that for the remainder of my time on earth I would ever have another day of joy or productivity, because I would be so devastated. Because my wife and I are very, very close, and we have been so for 25 years.

That's just 25 years. But the Son... The Son knew the affection and adoration and acclamation of the Father *from all eternity*. The Father and the Son were closer than any parent and child. They were more devoted to each other than any husband and wife. They were perfectly united in mind and heart. Until... until that Friday. That Friday Jesus took all of our guilt and failures upon his back. And then, in Jesus' hour of greatest need, the Father turned his back. You cannot possibly understand the emotional agony Jesus experienced. The people in hell can't even relate, because they were never as close to the Father as Jesus was. It was excruciating spiritual torment. That's why Jesus doesn't call out, "My hands! My hands!" or "My head! My head!" He screams out, "My God! My God!" He can't even call him Father anymore.

Brothers and sister, *that* is what makes Christ's sacrifice so immense... our forgiveness so immense. As we grow in our appreciation for the immensity of our forgiveness, our love for Christ grows too.



The intimacy of our forgiveness...

You heard Pres. Schroeder read Isaiah 6 in our opening worship service. You know the account well. Isaiah is going to the temple. As he reaches the top of Mt. Zion, there is the Lord in all his holiness. He's wearing that massive royal robe. Flying round him are the seraphim, singing "Holy! Holy! Holy!" so loudly that Isaiah feels the ground shaking under his feet.

Standing face-to-face with holiness, Isaiah becomes acutely aware of his own sin. For whatever reason, Isaiah's conscience goes to sins of the mouth. "I am a man of unclean lips." Perhaps Isaiah was thinking of naughty things that he said, things he knows he should not have said. Or, perhaps Isaiah was thinking of good things he *should* have said—sharing God's love with a next-door neighbor, warning a fellow believer who was straying from the faith—but he didn't say, for whatever reason: timidity, apathy, whatever.

God knows exactly what Isaiah is thinking—worrying about his sinful lips. So, what does God do? He has one of the angels take a coal from the altar and bring it near Isaiah's lips. Now, what do you think was going through Isaiah's mind as he saw that glowing coal grow closer and closer? Probably, "This is going to hurt. But I deserve it. I have sinful lips. God should just weld them shut." But as is God's normal modus operandi, that which looks absolutely awful is something he uses for incredible good.

You see that at the cross. What happens to Jesus looks awful. Yet, what was happening was the greatest good. *Good Friday.*

Brothers and sisters, we will see that in what is happening to our congregations and synod. It appears awful, a horrible decline. God is going to use it for the greatest good: to refine us, to focus on like a laser on our God-given mission.

You see it with Isaiah. It looks awful, that coal approaching his lips. Yet, it did him the greatest good. "Your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for."

Think of the intimacy of this forgiveness. That was not the Lord and all Israel on Mt. Zion. It was one-on-one, Isaiah and his God. And that God knew Isaiah intimately, so he focused on the very thing that scared Isaiah most—his sinful speech.

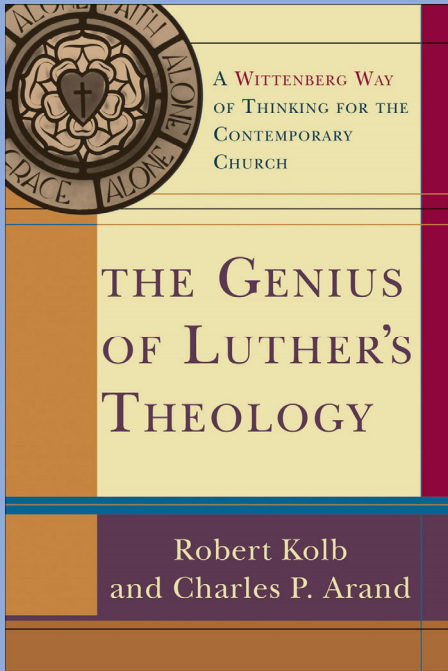
This intimate forgiveness was transformative. The Trinity begins musing: "Whom shall I send? Who will go for us?" Note what is *not* said. Go to whom? Where? To do what? To say what? For how long? At what cost? How dangerous is this? How much will I need to sacrifice? None of that. Isaiah doesn't care about any of that. The intimacy of God's forgiveness has Isaiah well motivated. So, when God says that he has a mission, Isaiah is all in. "Send me!"

You might think, "If only I had an encounter with God like that, I'd be motivated too!" Brothers and sisters, you have it better than Isaiah! You too had a one-on-one encounter with God. At the font, it was not God and the world. It was not God and your church. It was just God and you. He was washing you, claiming you, anointing you. It was intimate.


Isaiah knew a Messiah was coming. We know who he is. Isaiah knew the promise of forgiveness. Every Easter, we celebrate the fulfillment of that promise.

When he was fearful about his sin, Isaiah had his lips touched by a coal, a symbol of God's forgiveness. Last night you came to the Lord's table and partook of the *real* body and blood of Jesus Christ, given into death... shed for you... for the forgiveness of sins.

We have it better than Isaiah, my friends. And as that sinks in... the intimacy of our forgiveness... the Spirit motivates us to respond quickly and eagerly when God says, "Who will go for us?"



If hundreds of pastors all over the English-speaking world were to read and digest the message of *The Genius of Luther's Theology*, Christianity could, under God, experience another Great Awakening.



Dane Ortlund
Crossway Books

I will recommend one more book to you, *The Genius of Luther's Theology* by Robert Kolb and Charles Arand, two pastors from the LCMS. (My thanks to Prof. Mark Braun of Wisconsin Lutheran College for recommending this book.) In this book, they talk about how Lutheran theology relates to all the challenges we have delineated before the Christian church. I'm not going to share any quotes from the book. Read it. It's good. But what is on the screen is a quote from one of the reviewers of the book.

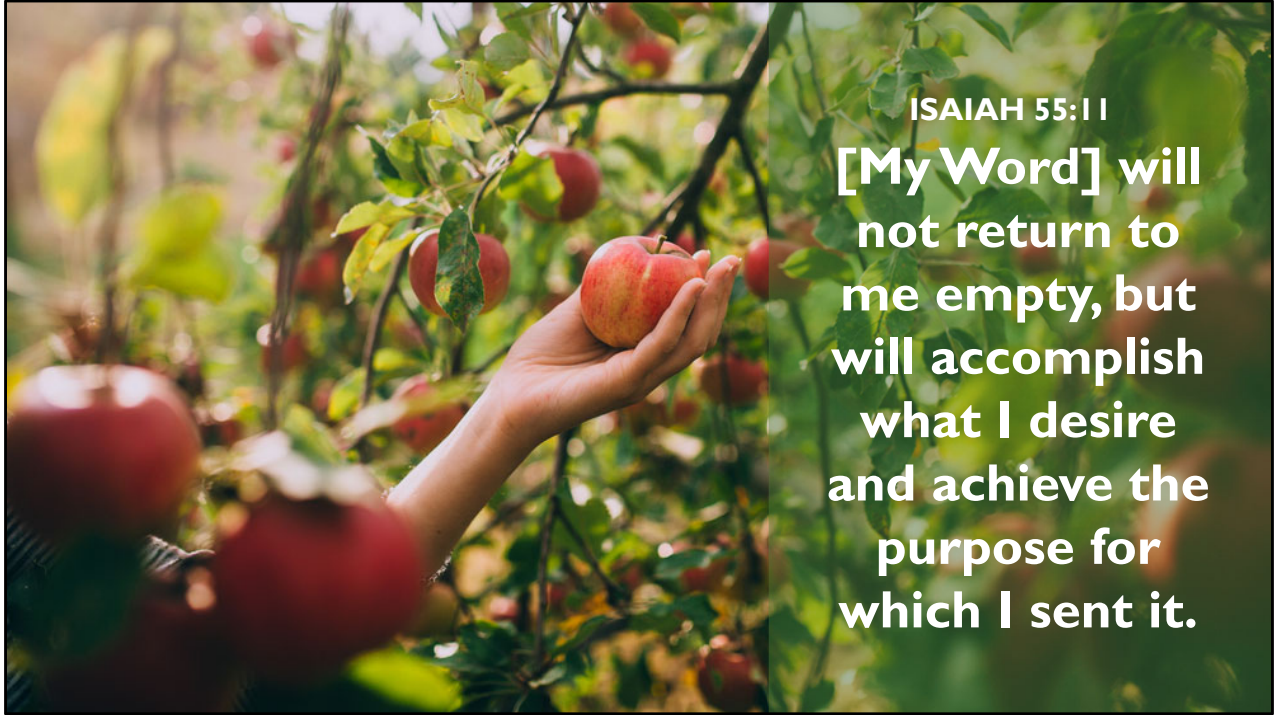
Think about what that review is saying. It says that while the American Christian church is unraveling, the reviewer believes it is possible for there to be another revival of some sort... another "Great Awakening." Who do you think wrote that review? Do you think it was Rev. Matthew Harrison, the president of the LCMS? Nope. Think it was our Pres. Mark Schroder? Wrong again.

That review was written by Dane Ortlund, a vice president of Crossway Books. He's an Evangelical. I want you to think about that. It's an *Evangelical* who has looked at what Confessional Lutheranism is all about and said that if American Christianity has any chance of coming back, it is going to take pastors to dig into that theology.

What a blessing we have been given by God! By his grace, we truly understand the gospel. We know it is the only thing that can raise the spiritually dead to spiritual life... the only thing that can create faith. And we know that the gospel is the only thing that can motivate us to do the hard work of the mission Christ has set before us.



One final thought...



Will you please read this passage with me.

Some of the most important words there are “what I desire.” God’s Word does what he desires. It can be easy to forget that.



You are right in your
verdict and justified
when you judge.

Psalm 51:4

It happened to me while canvassing in Lent 1999. I had been called to try and plant a church outside Charleston, SC. We canvassed year round, but in Advent and Lent we increased our efforts, inviting people to join us for Christmas and Easter.

I was canvassing with my then two-and-a-half-year old son, a cute little kid with big blue eyes and a head full of curly blond hair. I'd stand on people's doorstep with him holding my hand and ring the bell. When they answered, I'd launch into my spiel. "Hi! My name is Jon. I'm a pastor trying to start a new church in this area. If you don't have a church home, we'd love to have you join us this Easter."

At about 10am on a Saturday, I knocked on the door of a guy who looked a lot like the one in this picture. He was extremely short. He was wearing his dirty tank top. I could smell the liquor coming off his breath, even that early in the day. Still, I launched into my spiel. "Hi! My name is Jon. I'm a pastor..." Before I could finish, he starts to poke his finger repeatedly at my chest. Extremely aggressively he said something like, "If you don't get off my (F-word) porch right now, I'm going to (F-word) throw you off my (F-word) porch."

I could feel my son's hand squeeze mine harder, afraid of this angry man. Now, I wanted to say to him, "Sir, you are 120 pounds. I will break you over my knee and suck the bourbon out of your bones." Instead, I said, "I see I caught you at a bad time. I will come back later." I did come back later, without my son. He still wasn't interested in hearing what I had to say.

I had been having a bad stretch of canvassing. It seemed like no one was interested in my Easter invitation. So this guy was sort of the straw that broke the camel's back. I was considering hanging it up, being done with being a pastor. I felt like a failure.

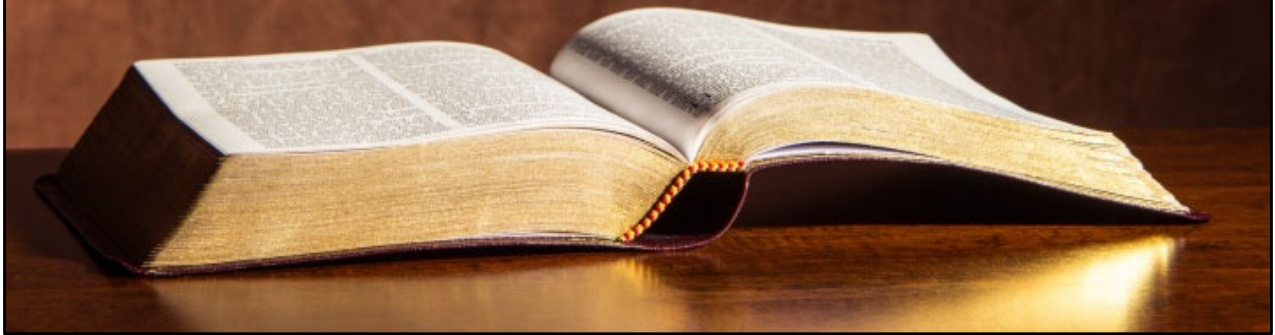
My mission counselor—Rev. Jim Radloff, who is now enjoying heaven—would call his missionaries about once each week. When he called, he must have sensed I was really down. He made a visit a few days later. He took me out golfing, and by the fourth hole I was sharing how down I was. I told him the story of this guy. I'll never forget what Jim said to me. "Jon, on the Last Day, people are going to give all sorts of excuses for why Jesus should not judge them. That guy is going to say, 'Jesus, I never had the chance to learn about you!'" And Jesus can now say, "That is simply not true. I sent you a pastor and his son, and you told them to get off your (F-word) porch." Then he quoted Psalm 51:4. "Lord, you are right in your verdict and justified when you judge." Jim made the point that on Judgment Day, my effort would result in Jesus' glory, for Jesus would be proven justified in his judgment of this man.

Again, God says that his Word will accomplish what *he* desires. And what he desires most is the glory of Jesus Christ. I was focused on *my* desires – that through my efforts, people would flock to this congregation I was trying to pound out of the ground. Because I didn't see *my* desire being fulfilled at that time, I felt like a failure. But as my friend Pastor Radloff pointed out, I was fulfilling *God's* desire to

glorify Jesus Christ.

, I had a redneck throw me and my son off his porch, swearing at us the entire time. (He was drunk at 10am on a Saturday.) I came back later without my son and shared a little bit of a law/gospel presentation, but was fairly quickly thrown off the porch again. When telling my mission counselor, Jim Radloff, he could tell I was bothered. He cited Psalm 51. HE said on Judgment Day, that man will probably say, "Jesus, I didn't have the chance to know!" And Jesus will say, "I sent you a pastor... and his son... right to your porch." The point was, God's Word did not return to him empty. Jesus was STILL glorified. It was not by that man being pulled into my congregation. But on Judgment Day, Jesus will be glorified in the sense that he will be proven justified in sending that man to hell. Jesus gave him a lot of chances, including through the witnessing my son and I tried to do. We had done our job. Convincing that man to repent... to believe in Jesus... to come to church... That was the Spirit's job. And the man has the power to resist the Spirit. So rather than being defeated, I should have given thanks to Jesus for letting me do work that contributes to his glory, no matter how that glory might be demonstrated.

***If we are doing
all we can with the gospel,
the numbers do not matter.***



I share that story, because with this type of presentation, which focuses a lot on numbers, it is easy to get consumed by them. Numbers are not unimportant. Scripture gives numbers, for example, telling us about 3000 people coming to faith on the Day of Pentecost. Even then, notice the word “about.” I think that word says it’s good and right to note numbers, but we don’t want to be consumed by them.

As I mentioned in my introduction, we use numbers for planning purposes. You do that in your congregations. We need good information to make good decisions. So, we look at the numbers.

But, my friends, do not be consumed by numbers. Do not think the goal is statistical growth. It’s fine to want statistical growth. It’s right to pray for it. But do not think it is the goal. If you do, it will lead to sinful, faith-killing pride if you grow... or... spirit-crushing, ministry-ending despair if you do not.

This is our motto in Congregational Services: *If we are doing all we can with the gospel, the numbers do not matter.* That does not mean we don’t look at the numbers. It means we don’t define success with numbers. Numbers are not the goal. The goal is to do everything we can with the tool God has given his Church—the Scriptures—to feed the faithful, reach the lost, and pursue the straying. “My Word will accomplish what I desire...” And what God desires most is the glory of Jesus Christ. That is what we must desire most too.



I said earlier that I believe it is possible that through increase gospel efforts, the statistical decline of WELS might turn around. I wasn't just trying to be the bluebird of sunshine to make you feel better. I sincerely believe that is possible. I believe that within one generation the Holy Spirit could, through our efforts, enable us to be a church body of more than 400,000 people.

However, we must also be acutely aware that, in spite of our best efforts, in one generation we might be down to 200,000 people left. So be it! But then, let us be 200,000 men and women who are immersed in the Word, who are full of the Spirit, who love one another like kin, who see the face of Christ in the lost and their neighbor, who are willing to sacrifice everything they have and everything they are for the sake of Christ's mission, who do everything they can to be light and salt in world that is dark and dying.

May God grant this among us now... and for the generations to come.

Thank you for your time.