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Editor's Note

We believe in one holy catholic church. Each of those adjectives speaks volumes of whom Christ has made his church to be, whom he has made us to be. Consider the third adjective—catholic. Better yet, give thought to καθολικός, “according to the whole.” While this brief note cannot begin to plumb the depths, two observations are offered. First, the church’s catholicity is “according to the whole” of biblical doctrine. That relates to the oneness of the church yet is distinct. The catholicity of the church embraces the whole body of biblical doctrine. No part of the body of doctrine is to be neglected or, even worse, rejected. The whole body of doctrine feeds and enlivens the whole body of the church. Thus, we rejoice in the three ecumenical creeds—Apostles’, Nicene, and Athanasian—as the whole church together confesses that which makes us catholic, the body of biblical doctrine.

That leads to the second observation. We are catholic “according to the whole” body of the church. The church is comprised of Christ’s people from all generations and from every tribe, language, people, and nation. While the whole body of biblical doctrine binds the church together by the clear bounds of scriptural teaching, the whole body of peoples who comprise the church make the church boundless. The church is not bound by time or culture. Christ takes his church into eternity beyond the bounds of time. The church does not conform to the cultures of humans but transcends and transforms them all.

The beauty of the church catholic—safely bound within the whole body of scriptural teaching yet transcending time and culture—is captured in part by this volume of *Concordia Journal*. The articles flow from three plenaries at the 2024 Multiethnic Symposium held at Concordia Seminary April 30 through May 1. Leo Sánchez’s “Mi Casa es Su Casa” embraces the body of biblical doctrine as confessed by a catholic body of witnesses unbounded by time and culture. The article builds off Luther’s lectures on Genesis, calling us to learn as Luther did from Abraham to practice biblical hospitality in an age of migration. With “All Those Who Call Upon the Name of Our Lord Jesus Christ in Every Place, Their Lord and Ours”: The Multiethnic Church in the New Testament, Dr. Jeff Kloha gives attention to the body of biblical doctrine with specific attention to the Pauline epistles while expanding to the greater context of the New Testament. Paul and the New Testament teach us that identity is found in Christ which then binds various ethnicities into a particular people that is the church catholic. Larry Vogel asks the poignant question; “Do We Really Believe

in the ‘Catholic Church?’” That question is accompanied by a difficult examination of demographic trends within the United States and The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. As we grapple with that reality, Vogel bids us to embrace the catholicity of the church, embracing people of all ethnicities as did the faithful who have gone before us.

Kevin Golden
Dean of Theological Research and Publications

Articles

“Mi casa es su casa”

A Lutheran Proposal on Being the Church Catholic in an Age of Migration in Dialogue with Roman Catholic Insights on Catholicity

Leopoldo A. Sánchez M.



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What does it mean to be the church catholic in an age of migration? Contemporary Roman Catholic reflection on catholicity—a traditional mark of the church—affirms that the church has an embracing quality, a disposition to welcome people of all ethnicities, languages, and nations into communion with God and one another

in a harsh and divided world. In an age of global migration, the plurality and diversity of people on the move serves both as a sign of this catholic goal and as a theological locus for the church to reflect on her identity and purpose in the world. In dialogue with these Roman Catholic insights, I explore and test the usefulness of the language of catholicity as a lens for Lutheran ecclesiology. I argue that the Lutheran tradition offers theological resources, such as the Lutheran Confessions’ distinction between sacramental and pedagogical signs, Luther’s catechesis on Abraham’s hospitality, his distinction between human love and the love of the cross, and his vision of the church as an intercommunion of happy exchanges, that can assist in articulating an ecclesiology in and for our age of migration.

Author’s note

Please note that this article is a significant revision of my 18th Annual Lecture from May presented at the 2024 Multiethnic Symposium.

Migration and Catholicity Today

My interest in this topic comes from two major factors, namely, migration and catholicity. First, we live in an age of migration, at a time in which we have the largest number of people on the move in history. As of May 2024, the United Nations Refugee Agency estimates that 120 million people in the world have been forcibly displaced from their homes due to conflict, persecution, or violence.¹ Displaced persons include refugees (often living in refugee camps outside their homeland), internally displaced people (within their own country), asylum seekers (asking for protection at another nation's port of entry), and other people in need of international protection. These numbers do not include other migrants who leave their countries due to various push and pull factors, but do not fit the criteria for refugees and asylum seekers. Those factors include family unification, poverty, failing governments, gang violence, and better economic and educational opportunities.

Accounting for people on the move living outside of their country of origin, the latest statistics estimate that more than 280 million people or 3.6 percent of the population worldwide are migrants—the majority of them Christian (47 percent).² The presence of migrant neighbors among us, like family members, co-workers, classmates, and members of our churches, means that the age of migration calls the church to reflect on her own ministry and mission to, among, and with migrants. Moreover, the theology of migration has become a growing field of study that invites our engagement. There are now several theological approaches to migration that can frame a church's response to migration issues and inform her work with migrants.³ At a more vocational and personal level, my interest in this topic comes from my work with migrant students for more than twenty years, many of them first-generation immigrants to the United States. I am also a migrant myself. Our family moved from Chile to Panama when I was an infant, and I moved from Panama to the United States during my last years of high school. My students' and my own migrant stories in the Americas have partly informed my thinking over the years on ministry with migrants and migration issues.

Second, in terms of catholicity, I am intrigued by the thesis that among Lutherans catholicity remains an unexplored or underdeveloped mark of the church.⁴ Some Lutherans tend to default to the language of unity or the oneness of the church to highlight what they have in common with each other, especially in times when such unity seems threatened by inside or outside factors.⁵ But how do Lutherans also deal positively with legitimate plurality in the church? At a cultural time in which the language of diversity and inclusion has become popular but also contested in some quarters, might the language of catholicity provide a helpful lens for the church to provide her own constructive theological view of such things?⁶ Of all the traditional marks of the church (including unity, holiness, and apostolicity), catholicity seems best positioned to get at the interaction of the one and the many, of unity and

plurality, in an account of the church in the world. Finally, catholicity has become a field of study that calls for our attention. Significant research on catholicity since the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965) has dealt with how the Catholic Church sees herself in relationship to others, including other Christians, people of other religions, and all people of good will.⁷

More specifically, catholicity has become an important theme in contemporary reflection on migration, especially among theologians in the Catholic tradition.⁸ Two interrelated insights arise from this research. First, an important dimension of catholicity claims not only that the church believes the one faith universally or everywhere in the sense of geographical extension across time, but also that the one church embraces people of all cultures, ethnicities, and languages. This embracing quality of catholicity especially describes the church's character as a hospitable people amid an inhospitable world.⁹ In a heartless world, the church catholic acts as God's welcoming people, a haven, saying to a restless and neglected people on the move, "mi casa es su casa." The church becomes a sign of communion with God for wandering people without a place to call home. Second, research on the intersection of catholicity and migration on the Catholic side asserts that global migration or people on the move can serve as a locus for theological reflection about the church, her catholic identity, and mission in the world. In this context, a locus means a place from which theologians can reflect, in light of God's word, on his purposes for the church at a particular time in history. A human experience, struggle, or aspiration such as migration can be such a place, which through an informed engagement with Scripture, invites Christians to ask what it means for the church to live and work in an age of migration.

Catholics on Catholicity, Migration, and Diversity

There are two dimensions of catholicity. In its vertical dimension, catholicity highlights the extension of the one faith universally across time and space. In its horizontal dimension, catholicity affirms the church's hospitality in a world hungry for belonging, for a safe place to call home. Research on catholicity and migration among Roman Catholic theologians today deals especially with the horizontal aspect, adding that migrant neighbors, theologically speaking, can teach the church something about her own nature and purpose in the world.

Catholic theology has reflected on the embracing catholicity of the church toward migrants. Italian theologian Gioacchino Campese explains:

[Catholicity] is not interpreted today in a traditional way, that is, in terms of the expansion and omnipresence of the Christian church, but first and foremost as an essential quality of a church that is always radically open to any human being and group, without distinction. . . . The migrants, with their rich diversity and urgent

need of inclusion, continue to remind the whole church of the fundamental importance of catholicity that is at the same time a gift, a mission, and a hope. The Christian community, of course, never completely realizes the ideal of catholicity, but it needs to constantly renew its full commitment to it, especially when migrants present themselves on the threshold of our churches.¹⁰

The statement makes two important points. First, Campese shifts the discourse from the vertical sense of catholicity as an expansion of the one faith to horizontal catholicity as the church's openness to all humanity for communion with God and one another. Note especially that Campese does not see this horizontal dimension of the church as an optional quality. It is an "essential quality" of the church.

What lesson can we gather from this insight? As a mark of the church, catholicity does not supplement the church's already established identity but defines significantly what the church is and does. Catholicity is not an addition that would be nice to have but one could do without, like adding a bit of extra cheese on a pizza or a bit of color on an already painted mural. Rather, catholicity as an embracing quality of the church complements the sense of catholicity as the universal extension of the fullness of the one faith. The former aspect completes the latter one in the sense that the church in her missional trajectory shares the one faith among the many in order to invite the many into her fellowship. Significantly, over time, the presence of the catholic many also enriches the expression of the one faith across times and places with the diversity of their gifts—be it linguistic, pastoral, catechetical, liturgical, artistic, musical, missional, and so on. Such contributions shape the church to grow in her catholic identity also in the sense of being and becoming whole, that is, in a way that she learns to express the fullness of the one faith across time and space through the teaching and witness of a wider and richer choir of voices.

Second, Campese's comments above point out that, due to their rich diversity and need of belonging, migrants today especially remind the whole church of the fundamental importance of embodying catholicity as a gift to celebrate, a mission to undertake, and a hope to look forward to in the new creation. He acknowledges that the church can never completely accomplish the ideal of catholicity, but she still needs to renew her full commitment to it, especially as migrants come near our churches. Campese argues that migrants offer the church a lens for theological and pastoral reflection on hospitality because they remind the church of her catholic commitment as the people of God to embrace neighbors with a need of belonging into her communion. By speaking of catholicity in inclusive terms, Campese evokes a key image of the church, from the Second Vatican Council, as the divinely instituted "sacrament . . . sign and instrument" in the world of the communion of all people among themselves and of all people with God.¹¹

Campese's reflections echo the language of *Erga migrantes caritas Christi*, a significant instruction from the Vatican, which argues that immigration and migrants remind the church in light of Scripture of her own identity, mission, and goal as God's visible sign of the communion of the human family with God. Approved in 2004 and drafted during John Paul II's pontificate, the instruction reads:

Foreigners are also a visible sign and an effective reminder of that universality which is a constituent element of the Catholic Church. A vision of Isaiah announced this: "In the days to come the mountain of the temple of Yahweh shall tower above the mountains . . . All the nations will stream to it" (Is 2:2). In the gospel our Lord Himself prophesied that "people from east and west, from north and south, will come to take their places at the feast in the kingdom of God" (Lk 13:29), and "the Apocalypse sees a huge number . . . from every nation, race, tribe and language" (Ap 7:9). The Church is now toiling on its way to this final goal; today's migrations can remind us of this "huge number" and be seen as a call and prefiguration of the final meeting of all humanity with God and in God.¹²

The instruction reflects on the connection between catholicity and migration in several ways. First, migrations and migrants worldwide and across time remind the church of her catholic identity as a gift because God has made the church a universal sign for bringing all people to communion with him. Second, migrations and migrants remind the church of her catholicity as a call or mission that she has inherited from God because she is the instrument, the effective means, through which communion happens by gathering all peoples into her life. Finally, migrations and migrants universally and across time remind the church of her goal, her telos or fulfillment in God's plan of salvation, because the church from every nation, tribe, and language is the fruit of such communion at the last day in the vision of Revelation 7.¹³ Campese also sees in Pope Francis's ecclesiology a frequent use of the pilgrim metaphor to draw attention to the church's commonality and solidarity with migrants and refugees. Immigrants especially remind the church of her mission of evangelization, in which migrants often participate as agents, and of her own ecclesial identity as pilgrims on a journey whose goal is the promised land or reign of God.¹⁴

If catholicity is in the DNA of the church, then, it is not merely for the "wellbeing" (*bene esse*) of the church but part of its very "being" (*esse*). It is not an add-on to the church. It is who we are. As Carmen Nanko-Fernández, a Roman Catholic Hispanic theologian, once put it in an article where she speaks to her own US Catholic Church about the US Hispanic/Latino people in and among them, "We are not your diversity, we are the church!"¹⁵ In its embracing quality, catholicity hints

Sometimes one hears people say things like, “we are one in Christ despite our differences.” Immediately, one gets the sense that differences need to be overcome or erased.

at some notion of legitimate plurality or diversity in the one church. But what does such diversity entail? How do we think about and express it in relation to the unity of the church? One possibility lies in the language of difference.¹⁶ Difference does not have to be understood necessarily as something that harms the church’s unity. Sometimes one hears people say things like, “we are one in Christ despite our differences.” Immediately, one gets the sense that differences

need to be overcome or erased. The implication is that difference is ipso facto bad or at least inadequate. Admittedly, difference does not necessarily arrive at relational and unifying concepts like engagement or collaboration. For Nanko-Fernández, diversity cannot be difference in some absolute sense.¹⁷ Such notion creates a ghetto mentality and does not foster solidarity with others. But nor should diversity simply be conceived as a type of differentiated oneness that fails to account for a genuine diversity of gifts.¹⁸ Differentiated oneness amounts to homogeneity, which may acknowledge plurality in the church but struggles to show how that plurality enriches the church’s unity.

The challenge lies in moving beyond the mere awareness of diversity as a version of difference and toward the enactment of diversity in a way that avoids isolationism and invites mutually enriching conversation, learning, and collaboration. Might the language of catholicity provide the church a fresh way of getting at legitimate diversity and plurality? If so, then, as Nanko-Fernández asserts, diversity can be neither absolute difference nor homogeneous commonality. She argues instead for a vision of diversity in the church, where “our embodied particularity is experienced as multiple belonging” in a way that “what we seek is not sameness but points of intersection that allow us to engage.”¹⁹ The church catholic becomes an inviting community where people learn to interact with one another from, in, and through multiple relationships. At the end of the essay, I will return to the idea of multiple affiliation through the notion of interculturality as a way to think about catholicity through a more interdependent view of the church’s unity.

Lutheran Sources for a Catholic Ecclesiology in an Age of Migration

Having looked at Catholic insights on catholicity as an embracing quality of the church, and migration as a lens to remind the church of her identity and mission in the world, I can now offer a Lutheran contribution to being the church catholic in an

age of migration in dialogue with some of these insights. I will focus on theological frameworks and images of the church in the Lutheran tradition that generate constructive building blocks for articulating catholicity as an indispensable mark of the church.

Luther on the Vertical and Horizontal Marks of the Church

Does the Lutheran tradition have room for thinking about an embracing catholicity as a mark of the church? Before answering this question, let us recall that, in his treatise *On the Councils and the Church* (1539), Luther speaks of seven marks or signs of the church, namely, the word of God, the sacraments of baptism and the altar, the office of the keys and the pastoral ministry, prayer, and bearing the cross.²⁰ Luther locates the fulfillment of these marks of the church under the first table of the law, which deals with the command to love God and thus with the vertical relationship between God and us. For example, when Luther sums up his discussion on the seventh mark, he notes how through bearing the cross the Holy Spirit sanctifies and renews the church in Christ “to believe in God, to trust him, to love him, and to place our hope in him, as Romans 5 [1–5] says, ‘Suffering produces hope,’ etc.”²¹ The Spirit sanctifies the church to love and trust God (first table of the law) even through trials and afflictions.

Luther also has a broader conception of the marks of the church, which extends to the second table of the law, and thus to our horizontal relationships with and responsibilities to neighbors. These secondary or derivative marks of the church can be seen as the fruits of faith in the gospel that, by the Spirit’s sanctifying work through word and sacrament, take hold in the life of the church as she serves neighbors. As Luther puts it, “there are other outward signs that identify the Christian church” in the world as the Spirit guides her members to fulfill the second table of the law, such as “when we bear no one a grudge, entertain no anger, hatred, envy or vengefulness toward our neighbors, but gladly forgive them, lend to them, help them and counsel them.”²² These outward signs display before the world a gracious, generous, supportive and even sacrificial aspect of the church’s life. Might the Lutheran tradition also speak of other outward, horizontal marks of the church that display the embracing, hospitable, inclusive sense of the church’s catholicity? I will return to this question soon, but first I want to probe more deeply into the theological meaning of signs in the Lutheran tradition.

Migration as a Horizontal Pedagogical Sign for the Church

Does the Lutheran tradition have room for thinking about migration as a sign that can teach the church something about her identity and mission? Before I can answer this question with respect to migration specifically, I would like to step back and ask, more fundamentally, whether Lutherans have a theology of signs. In a sense, Luther’s

discussion of the seven marks of the church constitutes part of such a theology. By placing the marks under a discussion of the Holy Spirit's sanctifying work in the church, leading believers to grow in faith toward God and in love toward one another, Luther offers a grammar for discerning the church—and thus for distinguishing it from other associations or institutions distinct from or related to it—as a sign of God's sanctifying presence and activity in the world.

A more comprehensive Lutheran theology of signs remains, in my view, a task that has yet to be articulated. Such a theology will explore the ways in which God, through various signs, communicates life and truth to us. To illustrate this point briefly, a look at article 13 of the Apology of the Augsburg Confession (1531) on the number and use of the sacraments, reveals a twofold way the Lutheran confessors employ the language of signs.

If we define the sacraments as rites, which have the command of God and to which the promise of grace has been added, it is easy to determine what the sacraments are, properly speaking. For humanly instituted rites are not sacraments, properly speaking, because human beings do not have authority to promise grace. Therefore, signs instituted without the command of God are not sure signs of grace, even though they perhaps serve to teach and admonish the common folk.²³

The statement distinguishes between two kinds of signs.²⁴ There are signs of grace through which God communicates and delivers effectively the forgiveness of sins. These divinely instituted signs or sacraments “are actually baptism, the Lord's Supper, and absolution (the sacrament of repentance).”²⁵ More pertinent for our purposes, the text refers to other kinds of signs that are not sacraments but can “perhaps serve to teach and admonish.”

As an example of a pedagogical sign, consider a crucifix. Since the object does not communicate the forgiveness of sins as the sacraments do, it does not function as a sure sign of grace. Furthermore, having a crucifix in the church, or using a crucifix in a procession, is not an object, practice, or rite commanded by God. It is a humanly instituted sign. Even so, a crucifix can function as an outward sign to teach and admonish, if it is interpreted or used in light of God's word. The twofold pedagogical function of signs that are neither commanded nor forbidden by God (*adiaphora*) has an affinity with the Holy Spirit's uses of the law to convict of sin (or admonish) and teach (or instruct) concerning God's will for the believer. A crucifix can remind us, on the one hand, that our sins put Christ on the cross (second or theological use of the law). The sign can function in a convicting way to accuse us of sin. On the other hand, a crucifix can also call us to bear the cross as we serve our neighbors in their suffering (third use of the law). The sign can function to guide or exhort believers to follow God's will for their lives.

The insight that a sign can serve a pedagogical function, that it can teach us something in conversation with God's word about our identity and mission, offers a promising bridge or building block to engage Catholic thought on migration as a teachable sign for the church. If humanly instituted rites can also include broader human experiences such as migration, as Catholic theologies of migration seem to argue, the next question is whether these rites or signs can help us to learn how to live as the church in a world filled with migrants. What if the situation of migrants today could remind the church to repent for hostile attitudes toward migrants? Then the sign of migration functions as admonishment. What if the situation of migrants could be a place from which we learn to embrace hospitality toward these neighbors in our ministry and mercy work? Then the sign of migration functions to guide believers in applying God's will (second table of the law) for their lives in their relationship with these neighbors.

Luther on the Church as the House of Abraham in an Age of Exiles

Let me now return to my earlier question about whether there is a source in the Lutheran tradition that highlights the embracing catholicity of the church. Because of my discussion about the pedagogical function of signs in the Apology, let me also ask more directly whether the Lutheran tradition offers a source that looks at migration and migrants through the lens of Scripture as a pedagogical sign to admonish and teach the church about her catholic identity and mission in an age of migration. I submit that Luther's *Lectures on Genesis* written between 1535 and 1545 serve as such a source in a section where he reflects on Abraham's hospitality to the three strangers at Mamre in Genesis 18, and on what the text teaches us about being the church in relation to exiles in society.²⁶ The occasion for Luther's reflections on Abraham's hospitality is that a number of exiles are fleeing into the lands of Prince Frederick the Magnanimous (1503–1554), seeking refuge, mostly because of religious persecution. Others are fleeing because of various misfortunes in life. This situation leads Luther to think biblically about migrants as exiles.

Who is an exile for Luther? The three strangers at Mamre whom Abraham welcomed were exiles. Abraham himself was a stranger, a migrant. Adam and the whole Old Testament church in Israel also migrated from place to place. New Testament saints who were persecuted on account of God's word, especially Protestants in Luther's day, also count as exiles. Luther also includes other migrants who seek refuge for other reasons. In his commentary on Genesis 18, Luther's question is, what can the church learn about herself from exiles through God's word, and particularly from Abraham's hospitality toward them? Since Abraham stands as a classic example of hospitality in Christian texts even prior

*Abraham himself was
a stranger, a migrant.*

to the Reformation, Luther is likely building his teaching on this patristic catechetical tradition.

What then do we learn from Abraham that can inform how we act as a church in a world of migrants? Luther mentions several things. Through father Abraham, we learn about the struggles of exiles because he “often endured the rigors of the weather in the open country and under the sky; he was often troubled by hunger, often by thirst . . . for the term ‘exile’ includes countless hardships and perils.”²⁷ From Abraham we learn to be empathetic to exiles in their struggles, needs, and hopes. It was Abraham’s own experience as a migrant, says Luther, that “enabled him to be gentle, kind, and generous” towards other exiles and strangers.²⁸ Finally, from his own migrant experience, Abraham “learned this rule that he who receives a brother who

is in exile because of the word receives God himself in the person of such a brother.”²⁹

Luther uses the narrative of Abraham as a migrant and as a host to strangers to interpret the phenomenon of exile in his own day and, moreover, to admonish and teach the church about her attitudes and responsibilities toward exiles.

The theological rationale for Luther to invite Christians to see themselves in Abraham lies in the insight that Abraham is a type of a church both as a *pilgrim* in exile and as a *host* to exiles. The patriarch embodies the church’s identity as a pilgrim church in the world on her way to her final rest and home with God. This pilgrimage takes the believer through the hardships and struggles of life—an experience familiar to many people on the move. As host to the visitors at Mamre, Abraham also embodies the church’s catholic character as an embracing, hospitable people to strangers in an inhospitable world. The

church is like a haven for spiritual pilgrims as they face the hardships of life, including persecution for the sake of the gospel. Luther paints a beautiful picture of the church as the house of Abraham in the world.³⁰

Abraham is not merely an exceptional moral example of the virtue of hospitality, but an embodiment of what the church is meant to be about. The language Luther uses to make this point raises hospitality to the level of a horizontal mark or outward sign of the church. Because the church is the house of Abraham in the world, Luther asserts that wherever the church is, there must be hospitality, “for where there is no house, there can be no hospitality.”³¹ Faith and works go together. Luther writes:

“Hence, if we want to be Christians, let our homes be open to exiles, and let us assist and refresh them.”³² As in the rest of the horizontal marks of the church, one can admit that hospitality might not be a uniquely Christian virtue, since non-believers can also outwardly practice it apart from faith in God.³³ Nevertheless, hospitality remains a special identity marker for the Christian, whose love of neighbor flows out of true faith in God. It is this embracing spiritual quality, disposition, or virtue that, under the Spirit’s sanctifying work, leads the church to say, “mi casa es su casa,” and to live out this conviction through gifts of hospitality.

Luther teaches that there are two ways one can look at exiles. When we look at exiles through the “inner eyes of faith” and the Holy Spirit, we see Christ coming to us in his saints; but when we see them through the “eyes of the flesh,” their “bodily appearance is a hindrance to us.”³⁴ To see through the eyes of faith is to see through Abraham’s eyes. For Luther, Abraham stands as a type of the church in two ways. The patriarch is the father of faith, which justifies before God. This is the Abraham that Lutherans typically talk about in the church, namely, the Abraham of Galatians and Romans, whose faith was credited to him as righteousness. Luther adds another dimension to the church’s imitation of Abraham. The patriarch is also the father of good works and hospitality. He calls the church to see Abraham both as “a father of faith” and as “a father of good works . . . a most beautiful example of love, gentleness, kindness, and all virtues.”³⁵

Luther’s reflections on Abraham’s hospitality to the three strangers at Mamre during the Reformer’s own age of exiles serves as a timely resource for thinking about migration as a teachable sign for the church today. Through the Abraham story, Luther encourages the church to display the mark of an embracing catholicity by being the house of Abraham in the world. As a type of the church, Abraham embodies the fullness of the faith, which spreads universally from Israel to the Gentiles, to the nations (vertical catholicity). But Abraham also embodies the welcoming, inclusive dimension of the catholic faith in his hospitality towards strangers or exiles in need (horizontal catholicity). Luther uses the narrative of Abraham as a migrant and as a host to strangers to interpret the phenomenon of exile in his own day and, moreover, to admonish and teach the church about her attitudes and responsibilities toward exiles.

Luther on the Limits of Human Love and the Need for the Love of the Cross

An additional resource in the Lutheran tradition that can help us expand on the embracing catholicity of the church—its inclusive, inviting character—is Luther’s distinction between the two kinds of love, divine and human, in the *Heidelberg Disputation* (1518). Human love is like Facebook love.³⁶ Like likes like. It is the love of affinity, whereby we are naturally attracted to people like us. In other words,

humans love people with whom they share attributes they see or want to see in themselves. Attributes they already have, are attracted to, and see as pleasing. Human love is naturally attracted to people who are deemed to image divine attributes in a creaturely way—attributes like goodness, wisdom, justice, truth.³⁷ Luther contends that the philosophers and scholastic theologians of his day can only conceive of love in human terms.

For Luther, part of the problem with human love lies in its utilitarian tendencies. We love people because they are attractive to us, or we benefit from them in some way. Sometimes we look at migrants through those eyes. In public debate and discourse about migrants, people often argue about whether they are a liability or a benefit to us. In this regard, I have observed how closed- and open-borders people are strange bedfellows.³⁸ They are all operating from a utilitarian ethic. For Luther, there is another kind of love that should norm, orientate, and structure human relations. In contrast to human love, the love of the cross does not look for something or someone attractive to love but bestows love upon the unattractive and unlovable person. In this way, the love of the cross reflects how God loves sinners in Christ.

Rather than seeking its own good, the love of God flows forth and bestows good. Therefore sinners are attractive because they are loved; they are not loved because they are attractive. For this reason the love of man avoids sinners and evil persons. Thus Christ say: “For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners” [Mt 9:13]. This is the love of the cross, born of the cross, which turns in the direction where it does not find good which it may enjoy, but where it may confer good upon the bad and needy person. “It is more blessed to give than to receive” [Acts 20:35], says the Apostle.³⁹

Although human love or the love of affinity in human relations, as well as its language of benefits and liabilities, remains an inevitable fact of life in the political realm, the love of the cross in a sense calls Christians to live according to an ethic that moves beyond mere human love. Despite their positions on political issues, members of the church are still called to embody in some way this sacrificial, Christlike love towards neighbors who are not seen as naturally attractive to them for various reasons. By speaking of divine love as the love God works in and through believers, Luther places the love of the cross in the context of the Holy Spirit’s work of sanctification and thus in the horizontal sphere of human relationships. The love of the cross functions as a mark of the church in the world, a form of bearing the cross for the neighbor in his need. Luther’s teaching suggests that the church’s embracing catholicity does not only mean showing hospitality, which can also be extended to people like us, but a cruciform way of life that also makes room for people unlike us. Such catholic love flows through Christians when they confer the good upon the

bad and needy person. What would cruciform hospitality look like in an account of the church today? What would an embracing catholicity that includes unlovable and unattractive neighbors look like in our age of migration?

On an Intercultural Catholicity of Happy Exchanges

To expand or draw out potential implications of an embracing catholicity for the church in an age of migration, I return to my earlier observation about the possibility of thinking about plurality or diversity in the church through the lens of catholicity. As migrants become members of our churches and communities, catholicity invites us to a way of life in which we partner with and mutually enrich one another in expressing our unity in Christ. Such life together moves beyond mere coexistence and embraces collaborative learning and relationships. The language of interculturality has been used in a variety of fields, such as missiology, religious studies, and philosophy, to study mutually informing patterns of relationships between people of diverse cultures, including religious communities.⁴⁰

The point is not to become the other person, but to look for connections and collaborations.

The problem of social cohesion because of waves of migration has raised questions about the best ways to think about unity amid plurality. Because of their static view of culture and failure to account for cultural change and exchange, the consensus has been to move away from multicultural images such as the melting pot, in which all cultures simply assimilate into one culture, or the analogy of the mixed salad where distinct cultures mix together while basically maintaining their own independence.⁴¹ In response to multiculturalism, missiologist Henning Wrogemann observes that intercultural studies have attempted to account for “the complexity of mutually interacting cultural configurations.”⁴² A way to highlight such complexity lies in the language of “hybridity” understood in terms of *multiple affiliation*, namely, the idea that “individuals (and groups)” can operate according to a dynamic range of cultural associations depending on “the expectations of various social configurations” and their “own interests.”⁴³ For example, migrants are not only people on the move. They are not only refugees, asylum seekers, or immigrants. They also belong to a mixture of ethnic, linguistic, socioeconomic, educational, geographical, family, and religious groups that shape their thoughts and behaviors at different times. Moreover, because cultures are not static as people encounter each other, it is expected as the rule more than the exception that over time migrants will be shaped and shape those with whom they interact. These intercultural insights align to some extent with Nanko-Fernández’s assertion—discussed earlier in this essay—that diversity in the church

cannot be understood as homogeneous commonality or absolute difference. Instead, she speaks of diversity in the church “in terms of an expanding understanding of hybridity as multiple belonging.”⁴⁴ The point is not to become the other person, but to look for connections and collaborations.

To appreciate the value of interculturality for a discussion of the church’s catholicity, I find it helpful to distinguish between multicultural, cross-cultural, and intercultural ways of thinking about interactions with others.⁴⁵ What are the strengths and weaknesses of these terms? Multicultural language acknowledges a multiplicity of cultures but does not show their relationship or connection to each other. Think of people looking at each other from two separate islands or worlds that stand by each other but do not interact meaningfully with one another. There is an awareness of the other, of something different and perhaps strange, but there is no serious attempt at engaging each other. Cross-cultural language moves beyond the mere awareness of the other and suggests the image of a bridge, which allows people in parallel worlds to cross the boundaries that separate and prevent them from knowing each other better. Sometimes cross-cultural thinking could mean in practice that only one culture crosses over into the other. In this case, there is only a one-sided crossing but no significant or sustained exchange. One culture brings all the gifts and benefits to the other side of the cultural border, sharing its legacy or patrimony without receiving from or being enriched by the other group. Cross-cultural language can be good but might not go far enough. If not careful, cross-cultural thinking can foster unhealthy relationships of paternalism and dependency.

For intercultural discourse, the image of a soccer team comes to mind. All members of the team contribute to life together as collaborators when they bring their distinctive gifts and talents to serve one another and enrich the whole. The language of multiple affiliation and belonging hints positively at the diversity of people whose interests and actions intersect at various times. But how does such multiplicity foster the unity of the church in an ongoing and deliberate way? In his treatise on *The Blessed Sacrament of the Holy and True Body of Christ, and the Brotherhoods* (1519), Luther paints a picture of the church as an intercommunion of love, where her members become Christ to each other as they share in each other’s burdens and joys. “As love and support are given you” by Christ through his saints, so also “you in turn must render love and support to Christ in his needy ones.”⁴⁶ The dynamic image of receiving from Christ through his saints and giving to Christ in his saints shows a way to think about the church catholic as a mutually enriching community of gracious or happy exchanges. The language of interchange or exchange infuses catholicity with a dynamic and engaging way to foster the unity of the church. In addition to the cruciform approach to hospitality already discussed, the description of catholicity in terms of happy exchanges in the one church includes partnership, interdependence, and mutual consolation and support. Moreover, exchange language reminds us that

hospitality is not reduced to one-way generosity but includes learning from others and working with one another in all areas of the church's life and mission.

Conclusion

I have argued that Luther's reflections on Abraham's hospitality as a mark of the church offers an example of a Lutheran interpretation of migration as a sign of the times in light of the gospel that teaches the church about her catholic identity and mission in the world. Articulating a Lutheran ecclesiology under the pedagogical sign of migration has the potential to admonish and teach Christians how to live in accordance with the love of the cross as they relate to migrant neighbors today. Such an ecclesiology can encourage the Lutheran church to live out her catholic identity in a hospitable, cruciform, and interdependent way. My prayer is that, as the Holy Spirit sanctifies Christ's church to be the house of Abraham in the world, she will embody, learn, and pray for this catholic way of life, so that she can also proclaim "mi casa es su casa" to migrants and other neighbors looking for belonging in an inhospitable world.

Endnotes

- 1 The UN Refugee Agency, “Refugee Statistics,” accessed August 31, 2024, <https://www.unrefugees.org/refugee-facts/statistics/>.
- 2 Pew Research Center, “The Religious Composition of the World’s Migrants,” August 19, 2024, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2024/08/19/the-religious-composition-of-the-worlds-migrants/>.
- 3 For a summary and proposal, see Leopoldo A. Sánchez M., “Theological Approaches to Migration: Their Impact on Missional Thinking and Action,” in *Migration, Transnationalism, and Faith in Missiological Perspective: Los Angeles as a Global Crossroads*, ed. Kirsteen Kim and Alexia Salvatierra (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2022), 177–194; and Leopoldo A. Sánchez M., “Immigration and Theology of Vocation,” *Dialog* 60, no. 3 (2021): 314–321, <https://doi.org/10.1111/dial.12688>
- 4 Larry Vogel, “Behind the Numbers: A Traditional Church Faces a New America” (PhD diss., Concordia Seminary, 2023).
- 5 I first explored this issue in Leopoldo A. Sánchez, “Toward an Ecclesiology of Catholic Unity and Mission in the Borderlands: Reflections from a Lutheran Latino Theologian,” *Concordia Journal* 35, no. 1 (2009): 17–34.
- 6 For an earlier attempt, see Leopoldo A. Sánchez, “I Believe in One Catholic Church: Thinking About Diversity as a Christian,” September 25, 2020, <https://scholar.csl.edu/ofs/9/>.
- 7 On June 28, 1998, Pope John Paul II established the Pontifical Council for the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerant People. On January 1, 2017, the work of the council passed to the newly established Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development. See <https://www.humandevlopment.va/en.html>.
- 8 There are too many studies to cite. As examples, see Peter C. Phan, ed., *Christian Theology in the Age of Migration: Implications for World Christianity* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2020); Susanna Snyder, Joshua Ralston, and Agnes M. Brazal, eds., *Church in an Age of Global Migration: A Moving Body* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2016); and Solange Lefebvre and Luiz Carlos Susin, eds., *Migration in a Global World* (London: SCM Press, 2008).
- 9 Referring to the Instruction *Erga migrantes caritas Christi* (2004), Schreiter observes that the document endorsed by the Holy See highlights, on the one hand, “seeing catholicity as geographic extension and the need to manage or harmonize a plurality of cultures and peoples into a visible unity,” while also “preserving language and offering pastoral services in the language of migrants,” and, on the other hand, that the Catholic Church “not only reaches out to migrants, but is also a haven for them in an often heartless world. In the midst of a dizzying pluralism created by migration, the Church remains a beacon of truth.” Robert Schreiter, “Catholicity as a Framework for Addressing Migration,” in Lefebvre and Susin, eds., *Migration in a Global World*, 42.
- 10 Gioacchino Campese, “Migration in the 21st Century,” *Theological Studies* 73, no. 1 (2012): 25.
- 11 “Since the Church is in Christ like a sacrament or as a sign and instrument both of a very closely knit union with God and of the unity of the whole human race, it desires now to unfold more fully to the faithful of the Church and to the whole world its own inner nature and universal mission. This it intends to do following faithfully the teaching of previous councils. The present-day conditions of the world add greater urgency to this work of the Church so that all men, joined more closely today by various social, technical and cultural ties, might also attain fuller unity in Christ.” *Lumen Gentium*, 1, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html
- 12 *Erga migrantes caritas Christi*, 17, https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/migrants/documents/rc_pc_migrants_doc_20040514_erga-migrantes-caritas-christi_en.html
- 13 From a Catholic perspective, catholicity as gift, mission and hope happens most fully when people are in visible communion with the Catholic Church. Since the Second Vatican Council, however, the Catholic Church recognizes that such communion can also take place, although imperfectly, among separated brethren. *Unitatis Redintegratio*, 3, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19641121_unitatis-redintegratio_en.html
- 14 Giacomo Campese, “‘You Are Close to the Church’s Heart’: Pope Francis and Migrants,” in *Church in an Age of Global Migration*, 28.

- 15 Carmen Nanko-Fernández, “We Are Not Your Diversity, We Are the Church! Ecclesiological Reflections from the Marginalized Many,” chap. 1 in *Theologizing en Español: Context, Community, and Ministry* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2010): 1–20.
- 16 J. A. O. Preus III once wondered if Lutherans might have room for a legitimate “theology of difference” that allowed for a diversity of gifts in the confession of the one faith. See J. A. O. Preus, III, “A Reflection on ‘Ayer’ por Justo González. Bajo la Cruz de Cristo (Hebrews 13:8),” in *Under the Cross of Christ—Yesterday, Today, and Forever: Reflections on Lutheran Hispanic Ministry in the United States*, monograph series no. 6 (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Seminary Publications, 2004), 51–64.
- 17 Nanko-Fernández, “We Are Not Your Diversity,” 12–14.
- 18 Nanko-Fernández, “We Are Not Your Diversity,” 14–17.
- 19 Nanko-Fernández, “We Are Not Your Diversity,” 19.
- 20 LW 41:148–166.
- 21 LW 41:165; “These are the true seven principal parts of the great holy possession whereby the Holy Spirit effects in us a daily sanctification and vivification in Christ, according to the first table of Moses. By this we obey it, albeit never as perfectly as Christ. But we constantly strive to attain the goal, under his redemption or remission of sin, until we too shall one day become perfectly holy and no longer stand in need of forgiveness. Everything is directed toward that goal.” LW 41:165–166.
- 22 LW 41:166.
- 23 Apology of the Augsburg Confession, XIII, 3, in *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000).
- 24 I first explored the two kinds of signs as a framework for discussing the relationship between Lutheran theology and (musical) culture in conversation with Catholic theologian Stephen Bevans’ *Models of Contextual Theology*. See Leopoldo A. Sánchez M., “Theology in Context: Music as a Test Case,” *Concordia Journal* 38, no. 3 (2012): 211–223.
- 25 Apology XIII, 4.
- 26 See Leopoldo A. Sánchez M., “The Church is the House of Abraham: Reflections on Martin Luther’s Teaching on Hospitality Toward Exiles,” *Concordia Journal* 44, no. 1 (2018): 23–39.
- 27 LW 3:180.
- 28 LW 3:180.
- 29 LW 3:187.
- 30 “Thus the saints are not received in a kindly manner and treated generously anywhere except in the homes of Abraham and Lot, that is, in the church, which acknowledges that it is the servant of the servants of God.” LW 3:188.
- 31 LW 3:179.
- 32 LW 3:180.
- 33 “However, these signs cannot be regarded as being as reliable as those noted before since some heathen too practice these works and indeed at times appear holier than Christians; yet their actions do not issue from the heart purely and simply, for the sake of God, but they search for some other end because they lack a real faith in and a true knowledge of God. But here is the Holy Spirit, who sanctifies the heart and produces these fruits from “an honest and good heart . . .” LW 41:167.
- 34 WA 43:15.40–41 (translation mine); cf. LW 3:196.
- 35 LW 3:185 (WA 43:7.28–29).
- 36 See Leopoldo A. Sánchez M., “Beyond Facebook Love: Luther’s Two Kinds of Love and the Immigrant Other,” *Concordia Journal* 46, no. 4 (2020): 23–39.
- 37 For a comprehensive treatment, see Tuomo Mannermaa, *Two Kinds of Love: Martin Luther’s Religious World* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010).
- 38 Sánchez, “Beyond Facebook Love,” 31.
- 39 LW 31:57.
- 40 According to Wrogemann, intercultural may signify “plurality within one particular society (keywords: migration, diversity, etc.) . . . cultural diversification among diverse expressions of Christianity on a global

scale . . . but also a broad spectrum of phenomena of an interreligious nature (for instance, relationships between Christians and Muslim, and particularly within the parameters of an intercultural comparison).” Henning Wrogemann, *Intercultural Hermeneutics*, vol. 1 of *Intercultural Theology*, trans. Karl E. Böhmer (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2016), 23. In this essay, my proposal centers basically on the first two senses of interculturality, asking how catholicity as a mark of the church can interpret cultural and ecclesial diversity theologically in the context of the Lutheran church as she encounters and embraces migrants in her fellowship and mission; for a Catholic perspective on migration and interculturality, see Peter C. Phan, “The Experience of Migration in the United States as a Source of Intercultural Theology,” *Center for Migration Studies Special Issues* 18, no. 2 (2003): 143–169, <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/pdf/10.1111/j.2050-411X.2003.tb00320.x>; for an example of intercultural philosophy, see Raúl Fornet-Bentancourt, “Toward a Philosophy of Intercultural Dialogue in a Conflicted World,” in *Intercultural Dialogue: In Search of Harmony in Diversity*, ed. Edward Demenchonok (Newcastle upon Tyne, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014), 43–56.

41 Wrogemann, *Intercultural Hermeneutics*, 350–351.

42 Wrogemann, *Intercultural Hermeneutics*, 352.

43 Wrogemann, *Intercultural Hermeneutics*, 354.

44 Nanko-Fernández, “We Are Not Your Diversity,” 18.

45 “Interculturality refers to the sustained interaction of people raised in different cultural backgrounds. In contrast to multicultural or cross-cultural settings, it denotes mutual exchange between cultures that can lead to transformation and enrichment of all involved.” Lazar T. Stanislaus and Martin Ueffing, eds., *Intercultural Living: Explorations in Missiology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2018), 11; for my use of the distinction between multicultural, cross-cultural, and intercultural forms of engagement, see Leopoldo A. Sánchez M., “Hispanic Is Not What You Think: Reimagining Hispanic Identity, Implications for an Increasingly Global Church,” *Concordia Journal* 42, no. 3 (2016): 232–233; and Leopoldo A. Sánchez M., “Salsa Music and Cultural Health,” *Re/Kindling Creativity and Imagination* (blog), February 23, 2022, <https://www.wabashcenter.wabash.edu/2022/02/salsa-music-and-cultural-health/>.

46 LW 35:54.

“All Those Who Call Upon the Name of Our Lord Jesus Christ in Every Place, Their Lord and Ours” The Multiethnic Church in the New Testament

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The apostle opens his letter to the church at Corinth with a familiar, almost ignorable greeting:

Paul, called apostle of Jesus Christ, and Sothsenes the brother: To the church of God which is at Corinth. Who are beloved in Christ Jesus,

who are called holy ones, together with all those who call upon the name of the Lord in every place, their Lord and ours. Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord, Jesus Christ.

It is just a greeting, right? It is easily ignored, flyover textual material one might think. Get past the greeting and get on to the theology, right?

But indulge me, and let's pay attention to the words, asking the question: To whom is the letter written? And what does this tell us about "church"?

We call it 1 Corinthians, obviously—but it is addressed to the "church of God which is located at Corinth." And the addressees, always in the dative case at the beginning of Greco-Roman letters (including Paul's) are not only the "church of God." This one happens to be located at Corinth. But the Corinthians are addressed in the letter "together with all those who call upon the name of the Lord in every place." That means every person who calls Jesus Christ "Lord" is addressed in this letter. And in case it wasn't clear, all those addressed have Jesus Christ as "Lord"—three times the word "Lord" is used in this sentence.

Therefore, the letter that we call 1 Corinthians is addressed *both* to those in Corinth *and* to all those in Christ everywhere, in every place, all with the same Lord—indeed that includes us, who live two thousand years later in a very different nation with a different tongue. The church is multicultural from the first to the present day.

From this we may make four observations relevant for thinking about the multiethnic church: First, from the outset, this letter conceives of “church” as *both* hyperlocal (“at Corinth”) and global (“all those who call upon the name of the Lord in every place”). Second, the teaching in the letter is addressed and will apply to all those in Christ, in Corinth as well as around the world. Therefore, the letter’s instruction to avoid dividing into parties over their favorite preachers, to avoid sexual immorality, how to evaluate meat associated with idols, the practice of the Lord’s Supper, spiritual gifts, and the resurrection all apply *both* in Corinth and around the world. Third, the head of all, in Corinth and around the world, is the Lord, Jesus Christ. It is his church, his kingdom, his teaching, his “mind” and way of thinking (2:16) which is to be found among them. And, finally, consequently, the basic understanding of church here—and in the rest of the New Testament—is that it is global and multiethnic, transcending nation, race, people, tongue: “All those who call upon the name of the Lord in every place.” There is no label more comprehensive of all peoples in Christ than that which with the apostle opens this letter.

The Lordship of Jesus Christ and the Unity of the Church

Before we move into the practicalities, I do not want to miss emphasizing that any discussion of “church” begins and ends with the confession that “Jesus Christ is Lord” (Rom 10:9; 1 Cor 12:3; Phil 2:11). In this confession, spoken at baptism and repeated in countless daily encounters with the world and its ways, the church begins, is sustained, and carries out its work. The church cannot be understood without or apart from this confession, for it declares that all other lords are now defeated and destroyed, whether heavenly or earthly. Under one Lord, all other identities and allegiances—nation, family, race, language, social status—are dissolved and a new people, God’s own creation, are brought forth. The primary identity is to be “in Christ.” So, there is now “one body and one Spirit” just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call: “one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all” (Eph 4:4–5).

The only means of entrance into the church is to have been gathered into Christ. This happens by the power of the word in baptism, where the church’s confession of Jesus Christ as Lord becomes the confession of the individual. There is no other means of entrance. The chronic obstacle to this teaching during the time of the New Testament was circumcision. In the first century this was as much an ethnic identity marker as it was a theological ritual. With strong biblical warrant (Gn 17), some in

the church *required* that all men, including gentiles, be circumcised to become part of God's chosen people, thereby at least implicitly teaching that Jesus could not be confessed as Lord unless one was circumcised. The Acts of the Apostles narrates the struggles that the church had in sorting through this issue, especially in chapters 10–15. First, the Spirit teaches Peter in a vision that the purity laws are no longer the mark of God's people. In Christ, all foods are clean (10:9–16) and, because “he [Jesus Christ] is the one appointed by God to be judge of the living and the dead,” now “everyone who *believes in him* receives the forgiveness of sins through his name” (10:42–43). As Peter was preaching this to the household of Cornelius, the Holy Spirit poured out on the “God-fearing” gentiles, and they were “baptized in the name of Jesus Christ.” Not without reason, Luke reports also that after the baptisms, “they asked him [Peter] to remain for some days” (12:48). As soon as the household of Cornelius was gathered into the body of Christ, they shared hospitality with and learned from Peter. That is to say, the newly baptized immediately participated in fellowship—Jew and Gentile—with others who were also in Christ. This shared identity in Christ created a new unity that transcended race and nationality, because of the word which created faith and confession of Christ.

A New People

Race and identity language is found throughout the New Testament. We may not recognize it, because our tradition and our confessional writings do not discuss race and identity as a theological topic—our tradition collapses all this under the *topos* of “church.” But identity, race, people, and the relationship of peoples under one Lord, Jesus Christ is in fact at the forefront of much of the New Testament. A quick scan of a concordance for ἔθνος alone yields over 150 occurrences. All of Paul's letters discuss Jew/Gentile except 2 Thessalonians and Philemon. The Gospels and Acts use the term abundantly, except John which uses Ἑλλην to refer to the gentiles. That word adds another twenty-eight occurrences of Jew/gentile issues in the New Testament. In fact, the theme of Jew, gentile, identity, and relationship are the key issues in Acts, Galatians (should the gentiles be required to do Jewish things?) and Romans (should the gentiles exclude the Jews?). It is discussed at length also in Ephesians and Philippians. In fact, Jew/gentile issues—that is, identity issues—are the most frequently discussed topic in the New Testament, after the “Kingdom of God” and the Gospel itself. The sheer volume of discussion demonstrates it was an issue that was debated and had to be resolved, so that these new communities would reflect this Kingdom of God and the lordship of Christ. That is, once lordship of Christ is confession, one's identity as Jew, Greek, Scythian, Barbarian, Roman (Col 3:11) is transcended into a new identity, one that welcomes all in Christ.

There are four words used in the New Testament to describe larger groupings of people, each of which touches on identity:¹

γένος – “a relatively large people group, *nation, people*” (ἐκ γένους Ἰσραήλ Phil 3:5), *tribe* (φυλῆς Βενιαμίν Rom 11:1).

ἔθνος – “a body of persons united by kinship, culture, and common traditions, *nation, people*” often in NT specifically “gentiles”: “those who do not belong to groups professing faith in the God of Israel” or “non-Israelite Christians.”

φυλή – often “tribe”: “a relatively large people group that forms a sociopolitical subgroup of the human race, *nation, people*” (ταῖς δώδεκα φυλαῖς ταῖς ἐν τῇ διασπορᾷ Jas 1:1).

λαός – “people” broadest, most general term: “a body of people with common cultural bonds and ties to a specific territory, *people-group, people* as nation.”

To anticipate some of the conclusions, when we come to the throne scenes in the Apocalypse of John, all these terms are used to describe the diversity of peoples who worshipping the lamb who was slain:

- Revelation 5:9–10 “you were slain, and with your blood you purchased for God persons from every tribe and language and people and nation (ἐκ πάσης φυλῆς καὶ γλώσσης καὶ λαοῦ καὶ ἔθνους). You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God.”
- Revelation 7 lists the twelve tribes of Israel, each with 12,000 among the 144,000 elect. But then the great multitude before the throne in white robes, holding palm branches, “from every nation, tribe, people and language” (ἐκ παντὸς ἔθνους καὶ φυλῶν καὶ λαῶν καὶ γλωσσῶν).

Note that they are all before the throne, all wearing white robes as the baptized in Christ, and yet they still can be identified as coming from tribe, nation, language, tongue. Their identity as nation, tribe, language, people remains yet is transcended by the unity that is created in Christ, thereby creating a new, single community with a new identity.

The Letter to the Galatians brings the question of the means of unity to the fore: who could be included in the church, and, importantly for our purposes, on what basis? That is, what unites someone to the church? Paul’s gospel, that Christ alone was sufficient to bring one into the people of God and to make one heirs of the covenant and children of Abraham (3:29), led him to proclaim the message about Christ even to the gentiles. They became part of the ἐκκλησία without undergoing the key mark of the covenant: circumcision. Subsequent teachers who arrived after Paul’s departure

from the region of Galatia brought a “different gospel”: that the gentiles could only become part of Israel if they were circumcised. According to them, faith in Christ merely made it possible for them to do what God had always required of his people: to undergo circumcision. In this view, faith in Christ was not sufficient; indeed, Christ’s work itself was not sufficient (Gal 2:20). Something else was required. Paul calls this teaching “not gospel” (Gal 1:6–9). The first part of Paul’s strongly worded counterargument concludes with what is perhaps an allusion to the words spoken over the Galatians at their baptism:

For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. For whoever of you has been baptized into Christ, you have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is not male and female, for you are all one [people] in Christ Jesus. So if you belong to Christ, then you are seed of Abraham, heirs according to the promise. (Gal 3:26–29)

The point of Galatians 3 and its conclusion in these sentences is that now the gentiles are part of the single people of God (λαός; cf. 2 Cor 6:16; Ti 2:14) and as such, heirs of the promise. They have a new identity in Christ. The use of εἷς (“one”) to express unity is reflected also in Ephesians, where again the issue of the misuse of the law to divide gentile from Jew has been abolished, “so that he might create in himself one new man (ἓνα καινὸν ἄνθρωπον, all masculine singular) in place of the two, so making peace” (Eph 2:15). Consistently in the New Testament, unity in Christ is a given in the shared confession of Jesus as Lord. Any human teaching that would threaten that unity is rebuked. This unity transcends individual, cultural, linguistic, national, or any other kind of identity.

To understand Paul’s teaching in its historical context, it is important to understand the concepts of “race” and “people” in the Roman world and the environs of the New Testament.

Modern conceptions of race assume that ethnicity is natural, hereditary, and immutable. If you are Jewish, you will always be Jewish, if German always German. You might look more or less Jewish or American. You might evidence a few more or less cultural habits—real or caricatured. But in our modern construct of race, you are what your ancestors were, and you can’t change it. Our fascination with modern scientific analysis of things like DNA confirm this: Both of my sisters did the “23 and Me” tests, which informed them that our DNA says that we are central European in origin. Shock me. But what is the significance of that? That I use long, complex sentences? That I have an urgent need to be on time and efficient? That I’m inherently boring? All that may be true, but I can tell you that it has precious little, if anything, to do with who I am or how I behave. Now, admittedly, the fact that my grandparents and great-grandparents were part of the Franconian emigration and settled in the

Saginaw Valley of Michigan in a town called Frankenlust—that certainly is the primary reason that I was baptized into the name of Christ as an LCMS Lutheran. Had my ancestors been from a different part of Germany I would probably be Roman Catholic or some form of Reformed. Still, none of that is inevitable, and we are finding in our post-denomination age that the Millennials and Gen Zs are not defaulting to the religions of their parents, let alone their distant ancestors. But this construct of race and ethnicity as indelible and unchangeable did not exist in the Roman world. Already in the classical period, Greeks thought that “barbarians” could become “Greek.” This is especially noteworthy, since the very concept of the barbarian emerges in the context of the Persian Wars as the overarching category to signify not-Greek. The barbarian was not seen to be divided from the Greek by means of an impermeable boundary. For example, in the early fourth century BCE, the orator Isocrates declared the prowess of Athens as follows: “[Athens] has made the name of Greeks to seem to be no more of *genos* but of thought, so that those who share our education, more than those who share a common nature (*physis*), are to be called Hellenes.”²

Isocrates uses two physical terms, *genos* and *physis*, to mark the barbarians out from the Greeks, yet remarkably through education (through *padeia*), barbarians can become Greeks. The boundary between Greek and barbarian is therefore porous; what you were born could be changed.

This idea, that people groups could be made into new people groups, was put into practice in both the Hellenistic and Roman periods. Alexander’s conquests spread Greek ideas, culture, trades, roads, and religions around the world, and the world brought their ideas, culture, goods, and religions to the Greeks. The Romans continued this practice; they not only wholesale adopted Greek culture (and language), but they extended the idea that boundaries between people were porous to the extent that even Roman citizenship was granted to ever growing portions of the population through the second and third centuries.

A key part of this assimilation, or redefinition of one’s identity, was that race and religion had always been closely identified in the ancient world. We see this constantly in the Old Testament, where the battles between nations are seen as battles between the gods of those peoples. Egypt had their gods; Israel had their God; Babylon had their gods, and so on. However, with Hellenism and Romanism, people could and did frequently adopt new religious practices, and thereby changed, literally changed their *ethnicity*. Let me say that again, because it is a key pattern of thought that helps us understand the New Testament: An individual’s nation, people group, tribe, language, ethnicity could and indeed did change by adopting new instruction and new religious practice.

The New Testament writers, with this understand that race and ethnicity are porous and changeable, wrote about the people who are in Christ as if they are now

a new people, a new race, a new nation. This is not—and this needs to be clear—this is not figurative or metaphorical language in the New Testament. It is not that the apostles are saying that the church is “like” a new nation, or “corresponds” to a new people. No, the language is literal; just as a barbarian could become a Greek, a Greek could become part of this new holy nation.

Consider this well-known passage: “But you are a chosen **race** (γένος ἐκλεκτόν), a royal priesthood, a holy **nation** (ἔθνος ἅγιον), a **people** for his own possession (λαὸς εἰς περιποίησιν), that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you **out** of darkness **into** his marvelous light” (1 Pt 2:9).

Notice the repetition of those identity vocables: race, nation, people. You were brought out of one thing and brought into a new thing: brought out of whatever race, nation, people you were a part of before, and brought into a new race, nation, people. One that is chosen, royal, holy, under his lordship.

Or more specifically, and my apologies for the length of this passage, turn to Ephesians 2, where the separation—indeed hostility—between Jew and gentile is broken down and a “new man” is created:

Therefore remember that at one time you Gentiles in the flesh, called “the uncircumcision” by what is called the circumcision, which is made in the flesh by hands—Remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who has made us both **one** and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself **one new man in place of the two**, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility. And he came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near. For through him we **both** have access in **one Spirit** to the Father. So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are **fellow citizens** with the saints and **members of the household of God**, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, **Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom** the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple **in the Lord. In him** you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit. (Eph 2:11–22 ESV)

Notice that both the gentiles and the “circumcision” exist only in “the flesh.”

Neither are the ultimate people of God. But in Christ, in his flesh, both have now been brought near. And in his flesh, he broke down the dividing wall of hostility—get this now—by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances. That is to say, the religious activities that previously defined the “commonwealth of Israel” and excluded the gentiles, Christ has tossed out, literally “broken down in his flesh.” Recall that in Roman culture, religious practices defined your ethnicity. Since the commandments in ordinances were now gone, there is now “one new man in place of the two”—that is, neither Jew nor Greek but a new, different person! Now in Christ all are “fellow citizens”—there is a new identity created, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus as the cornerstone, and a new kind of religion, a people made into a holy temple in the Lord. This new people is the (single) dwelling place for God.

So now—in Christ—has been created, literally, a new people, who are neither Jew nor Greek nor anything defined by humans. Rather, they are in Christ, one new people.

This theme is picked up and made explicit in early Christian writings. I won't elaborate on these here, but to briefly show continuity from the New Testament into early Christian teaching:

- *Diognetus* 1: “neither recognizing those who are considered to be gods by the Greeks nor observing the superstition of the Jews; what is the nature of the heartfelt love they have for one another; and why this new race or way of life has come into the world we live in now and not before.”
- *Martyrdom of Polycarp* 14,1: “the whole race (παντὸς τοῦ γένους) of the righteous who live in your presence.”
- *Polycarp* 3.2 “the god-loving and god-fearing race.”

The First Multiethnic Church: Antioch (Acts 11; Galatians 2)

What did it look like in practice, this new people, gathered in Christ, neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, but one people in Christ? Unfortunately, it wasn't easy. The first recorded multiethnic church was in Antioch, founded after the persecution that martyred Stephen and described in Acts 11. Initially the gospel work there began as it did in other places: with preaching to the Jews. But then “men from Cyprus and Cyrene” began speaking to the “Greeks.” As a result, “a great number who believed turned to the Lord” (11:20). Including Greeks in the community was an innovation, so Barnabas is sent from Jerusalem to investigate. He is “glad” and “exhorted them all (including the Greeks) to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast purpose” (11:23) and, again, “a great many people were added to the Lord” (11:24). Saul was brought to Antioch by Barnabas; together they teach the church for a year. The section concludes with this new gathering of both Jews and Greeks being given a new

name to match their new (united) identity: “in Antioch the disciples were first called Christians” (11:26).

This all went swimmingly, apparently—at least at first. By Acts 13, Antioch launches the first intentional (that is, not driven by persecution) sending out of people to speak the gospel to new areas.

But as happened so many times in the New Testament, placing identity in something other than Christ was imported also in Antioch, as happened later in Galatia. This time, perhaps surprisingly, it was Cephas/Peter himself, who had learned in Acts 10 that God calls people from all nations. Yet in Antioch, Peter began to withdraw from table with gentiles—insertion of identity based on religious practice rather than identity as a new people in Christ:

But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned. For before certain men came from James, he was eating with the Gentiles; but when they came he drew back and separated himself, fearing the circumcision party. And the rest of the Jews acted hypocritically along with him, so that even Barnabas was led astray by their hypocrisy. But when I saw that their conduct was not in step with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas before them all, “If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you force the Gentiles to live like Jews?” (Gal 2:11–14 ESV)

The first multiethnic church is also the first church where there was conflict over practice: the call to compel the gentiles to Judaize. Note that the focus was *religious* practice. Again, in the Roman world one’s ethnicity was not skin color or language, but the religious practices of a people. When you abandon your religious practices, you take on the identity of a new people. The “Judaizers” were not yet ready to live out this new identity in Christ. But for the sake of the gospel, Peter’s actions were condemned by Paul. Requiring the gentiles to practice circumcision and observe food laws was not wrong simply because Jesus had done away with the law. That was true, in a sense. But what the resurrection of Jesus Christ and the sending of the Holy Spirit accomplished was the abolishing of old identities and the establishing of a new people. One whose “religion”—whose faith and life—was under the lordship of Christ, and not defined by former religious practices—be they circumcision, food laws, or worshipping idols. There was, literally, a new people with a new religion, one now lived by the Spirit of Christ. And the old had to go, because there was now brought into existence a new people under one Lord, Jesus Christ.

The Translated Gospel

This single new “people” was created, in every place, by the seeking gospel. The Spirit

of God finds people and speaks the good news to them in ways that they can hear, understand, and receive. The gospel message from the beginning is a message that was translatable and hearable by people no matter their background. The first recorded public teaching about Christ, in Acts 2, demonstrates this clearly. The apostles speak the good news to the Jews and proselytes gathered for the feast of Pentecost from all corners of the known world: the “Parthians and Medes and Elamites and residents of Mesopotamia” are not even part of the Roman empire! The list goes on to include the eastern Mediterranean, North Africa, Asia Minor, Rome itself, and even islanders (Cretans) and Arabs. Remarkably, in a sort of anticipation of Google Translate, “we hear them telling in our own tongues the mighty works of God” (Acts 2:8–11). From the beginning, the gospel message was *translated into* other languages. As common as Greek was (and it is not certain what language the disciples spoke that day, but Hellenistic Greek is likely), the gospel is still heard in as many as fourteen different languages. The significance for our discussion is that the gospel is not hearable in a single language only. The Holy Spirit did not select only one people or tongue to hear the gospel, nor only one language that alone could convey God’s message in Christ. Instead, all people heard—instantly—in their own language the single gospel message. Space does not permit discussion here, but this approach of bringing the gospel into all languages continued from the beginning as the New Testament writings were translated into Latin, Coptic, and Syriac already by the early third century, and then into hundreds upon hundreds of languages—a work that continues to this very day. People bring a language, and they keep their language, even as they are brought into Christ. There is at the same time both a going into a new space and bringing the gospel in words and ways that they can understand, but also transforming people under the lordship of Christ to be a part of this new people, who live in community with others who call upon the name of the Lord.

The Multiethnic Church Practically Speaking

As the new communities in Christ were formed, old religious practices were done away with along with their old identities. Practices such as eating or avoiding meat or observing religious festivals are left to one’s own discretion (Rom 14:2–5), with the only concern being that it be done “to the glory of God” and “makes for peace for mutual upbuilding” (Rom 14:19). The community is paramount; the unity created in Christ cannot be threatened by old religious practices and the identities that existed previously. Hence, the decision to eat or not eat is situational, and not one’s own choice. Rather, identity in Christ and the unity that creates is to be the primary concern: “decide never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of a brother . . . if your brother is grieved by what you eat, you are no longer walking in love. By what you eat, do not destroy the one for whom Christ died” (Rom 14:13–15). Similar instruction is given in 1 Corinthians: “knowledge puffs up, but love builds

up” (1 Cor 8:1). To the “strong” in Corinth, who think that their freedom in Christ allows them to do anything they like, Paul places the brother and sister and their relationship to Christ first: “Therefore, if what I eat causes my brother or sister to fall into sin, I will never eat meat again, so that I will not cause them to fall” (1 Cor 8:13).

Similarly, religious festivals and new moons or Sabbaths (and the identities that they formed) are no longer essential: they are only “shadow,” but the reality is Christ and his body, the church (Col 3:16–19). Even circumcision itself, the most important religious identity marker of all, is irrelevant. All that matters is the new life in Christ: “For neither circumcision counts for anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation” (Gal 6:15).

Along with the dispensing of old religious practices for the sake of the unity of the body of Christ, the church positively sought to embody its unity in Christ even across cultures. Detailed descriptions are available elsewhere.³ Here we will only note that the descriptions of “church” in the New Testament include transcongregational and indeed transethnic and transnational communication and encouragement (1 Thes 1:7–8; 2:14), hospitality (Rom 16:1–2; 1 Cor 16:10–11; and note the naming of diverse people and communities who deliver the collection for the saints in Jerusalem, Acts 20:4), shared teachers and communication (Col 2:1; 4:16; 1 Cor 4:16–17), and mission (2 Cor 8:23). Note especially Paul’s request that the church in Rome financially underwrite his plans to “preach the gospel where Christ has not already been named” (Rom 16:20).

In every one of these community activities, the “new people” are not defined by a practice, they are defined by a new religion: one based not on ritual or rules, but one based on the lordship of Christ. Every situation encountered by new Christians is resolved by answering two questions: First, does it glorify God? Does it reflect the single lordship of Christ? Second, and as importantly, does it help my neighbor confess Jesus Christ as Lord. That’s it. That is the basis for unity: love of God and love of neighbor in Christ.

Implications

I hope this framing of how the New Testament church thought through these issues of identity as a new people can help us think through how we interact with one another as church, whether we are from different cultural backgrounds or the same: That we are called as church to help one another confess Jesus as Lord and live as God’s new people in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation and helping our neighbor do the same. I hope this help makes sense of Paul’s conclusion to 1 Corinthians 9:

For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all,

that I might win more of them. To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though not being myself under the law) that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (not being outside the law of God but under the law of Christ) that I might win those outside the law. To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings. (1 Cor10:19–23 ESV)

Jew, gentile, under law, weak—are all irrelevant. Paul’s goal is to help the church put all these identities and practices aside and to live as God’s one people. Not, I’m going to foist my practice on you, but I’m going to both teach and to learn with you how best to live as God’s new people in your setting. This takes things that do not matter, and old identities being foisted on those brought into the kingdom, off the table.

To summarize:

- Religious practices were closely associated with ethnicity in the early Roman empire. Therefore, ethnicity provided a handy referential device to identify a new kind of community, a “people” distinct from any other people on earth.
- Race/ethnicity is mutable in the Roman world. Hence people could—indeed would—lose an identity and become a new people with Jesus as Lord.
- The new identity as people is found in Christ. This does not abolish older identities (laws, language, customs) but filters out that which did not serve God or serve neighbor. Hence because circumcision, food laws, holy days all were a hindrance to welcoming all peoples in the church they were abandoned.
- People of different nations learned from, and supported, each other. Serving one another in love is a genuine, even essential, goal.
- Christian communal identity has always been not a single essence (no given language, ritual, worship structure) but a series of ongoing (and continuing) learnings and definitions. The New Testament and the early Christians learned to learn from each other, not force themselves on each other or insist on their own identity as the sole form of being in Christ.

What I hope to have demonstrated is that the New Testament church did not set out to be a multiethnic church, as if that were an end in itself. Rather, they preached the gospel, let the Holy Spirit create a new identity—a new people—and then figured out in thousands upon thousands of situations what it looked like to love God and love their neighbor. This being given a new identity inevitably led to a multiethnic

church, for the old identities fell away in Christ, and people from every nation, tribe, people, and language washed their robes in the blood of lamb, and confessed one Lord, Jesus Christ, to the glory of God the Father, and gather together as one new people. This process of making thousands upon thousands of identity decisions was inevitably messy; disagreements arose. But to this day, God is gathering for himself a new people, from everywhere, who live as strangers and aliens in this world, but loved by God, and loving each other.

Endnotes

- 1 Definitions of terms from F. W. Danker, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2000).
- 2 Cited from Denise Kimber Buell, "Rethinking the Relevance of Race for Early Christian Self-Definition," *The Harvard Theological Review* 94 no. 4 (2001): 468.
- 3 Jeffery Kloha, "The Trans-Congregational Church in the New Testament," *Concordia Journal* 34 no. 3 (2008): 172–190.

Do We Really Believe in the “Catholic Church”? And Why It Matters

Larry Vogel



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Our theme at this conference is a confession: “We believe in one holy *catholic* church.”

But that compels me to ask if we really believe that. Do we believe in the *catholic* church? What is it that we say in our most public, common confessions—the creeds we repeat weekly if not more often? We say, “I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy

Christian Church.”¹ And “I believe in one holy Christian and apostolic Church.” No mention of the word *catholic*.

So, do we believe in the *catholic* church? Of course, the immediate answer to that is emphatic. Sure we do! There is that other creed—the one most often unspoken—where we confess “the catholic faith” that all must hold in order to be saved, and “the *catholic* religion” that acknowledges three distinct persons in one God not three Gods or Lords, and “the *catholic* faith” that we are to believe “faithfully and firmly.”²

Granted, each of those quotes is about catholic faith, not the catholic church, but it is implicit that we believe in the catholic church, too! After all, it is there even when we substitute for it and speak about the *Christian* church. Look at the bottom of the pages in the *LSB* whenever we confess the Apostles’ or Nicene Creed. It is there in the fine print: “*Christian*: the ancient text reads ‘catholic,’ meaning the whole Church as it confesses the wholeness of Christian doctrine.”³

We speak of the catholic church also in the Confessions. In the Apology, Melancthon flatly reminds us that “there is a ‘holy, catholic church.’”⁴ And he later rejects the charge that the reformation churches are innovating new beliefs in

worship, asserting that our common mass “does not contradict the catholic church.”⁵

So, yes, we speak of the catholic church—at least to some degree. We give it some attention. But maybe it deserves more. I want to argue this: that the church is catholic is a vital truth—vital especially for us today in the Missouri Synod and for confessional Lutherans. It is a vital truth for us as we face the new realities of mission today in the multiethnic world where we live.

But first a bit of mystery—or mysteries.

Here’s one: the mystery of a shrinking Synod, a dramatically shrinking Synod. This mystery has had us scratching our heads, planning well-meaning programs, and—too often—pointing fingers of blame at one another. Whose fault is it that we keep losing members? And why are we not alone in such losses? Why is the church in decline across the entire developed world? Which points to a deeper mystery. Why does one person welcome the gospel and another scorn it? How can that be?

On this deeper mystery let us be satisfied with the Augustana’s reminder that God “gives the Holy Spirit who produces faith, *where and when he wills*, in those who hear the gospel.”⁶

And that also means that, regarding the mystery of a shrinking Synod, the most important thing is to hold to something without a hint of mystery—something clear as crystal. Whenever and wherever faith comes, it comes by hearing the gospel! Faith always comes by hearing (Rom 10:17). So, the church’s ultimate task is never a mystery. We are sent forth with the gospel, from Jerusalem to all the world (Mt 28:19; Acts 2:8).

Ever since the risen Lord’s appearances, the gospel is given to be received and then handed on and handed down. Handing down the faith. Handing on the faith. These are two ways to consider what we do with the faith that has been delivered to us (Jude 1:3).

We hand *down* the gospel—and so the faith. We deliver it to those who follow us—to our children both bodily and spiritually. The Synod has done this well with our emphasis on baptismal catechesis, our commitment to congregational schools, our high schools, colleges, university system. Handing down the faith is at the heart of the parental vocation. (I noticed that *Grapho* has a lovely piece on this by Kristen Einertson.)⁷

We also hand *on* the faith. We proclaim it beyond our midst—to those outside us. To those who are not part of the church. To the “world.” About that—about faith coming always through the gospel by the Holy Spirit’s work; about the consequent call to make the gospel known; about the call to hand down the faith and hand it on—about all of that, there is no mystery. And, just maybe, that clarity can help demystify Synod’s decline to some extent.

Demographics and Denominational Decline

Certain things about synodical membership decline are not such a mystery after all. Much of the mystery disappears when one gives some attention to the social sciences. Demographics, the study of populations, can be especially beneficial, since LCMS membership decline, from a social science perspective, is an example of demographic change.

Paul Taylor, of Pew Research, speaks of two important “demographic transformations” at work in the United States today. Both affect the LCMS. Here’s his nutshell perspective: “Demographic transformations are dramas in slow motion. America is in the midst of two right now. Our population is becoming majority non-white at the same time a record share is going gray.”⁸

Let’s start with the second transformation—that the United States is increasingly “gray.” In other words, our population is aging. The average age of Americans is older now, significantly so, than that of previous eras. And that is a significant factor for the LCMS to consider.

To its credit, the Harrison administration has had the courage to sponsor two helpful studies of our decline, one by Ryan MacPherson, a historian, and another by George Hawley. In their separate analyses of LCMS decline, Hawley and MacPherson independently proposed that declining *internal* growth (that is, diminished birthrates and fewer young families) is the primary cause for membership decline. I commend their work, even though I take issue with some of the conclusions drawn by both MacPherson and Hawley. Nevertheless, the central conclusion of each—that Synod’s decline is related to birthrate decline in the United States overall—has obvious merit as the flip side of the aging of the US population. This combination of declining births and increasing longevity amounts to what demographers call the “demographic transition” (or DT).⁹

The demographic transition is the primary model for understanding what is happening, with human populations not just in the United States, but across the globe. Simply put, human populations are experiencing long-term declining birthrates while average life expectancy is increasing. In short: there are fewer young people, more old people.

Why is it happening? The DT starts with factors such as urbanization, industrialization, and—especially—scientific advances. All these affect quality of life. In particular, physical wellbeing improves thanks to improvements in sanitation, nutrition, and medical care. A major result is that fewer children die in infancy. If you go back several generations, the death rate among newborn children was between 20 and 40 percent, and sometimes much higher. Now it is generally under one percent. Similarly, in past generations a shocking percentage of women died from complications of childbirth with about one in ten women dying because of pregnancy and childbirth. And throughout most of history, younger people were more

susceptible to death from infections and illnesses. Thus, the first phase of the DT was population growth as more babies survived and then grew to maturity so they could have babies themselves.

The initial population growth phase of the DT is not permanent, however. Fewer infant deaths results in a reduction in the number of pregnancies. Birth rates begin to decline in the second phase of the transition. None of this happens overnight—as Taylor says, it is a “slow-motion transformation.” For many generations, five pregnancies might result in only two or three children surviving to adulthood. But thanks to improving conditions, most children now survive birth. But that soon results in fewer pregnancies. So, in the United States, over several generations, you go from families averaging five kids, to an average of three, down to two.

This demographic transition from young to old is worldwide, but it is most pronounced in the so-called developed nations. Europe, the Americas, and East Asia are all prime examples of populations with fewer young people and more older folks. Maybe you know that China’s population has declined for the past two years. As a result, India has now become the world’s largest population.¹⁰ But India is not exempt from the demographic transition. Although it is still growing, the elderly portion of India’s population is far exceeding its youth.¹¹

Closer to home, look at how the demographic transition has affected the United States (see Figure 1 nearby¹²). These two population graphs are from 1960 and 2020. They’re called population pyramids, and the first one does resemble a pyramid. The horizontal bars each represent a five-year age “cohort”—the segment of the population that is in a particular five-year age group—starting at the base (newborns

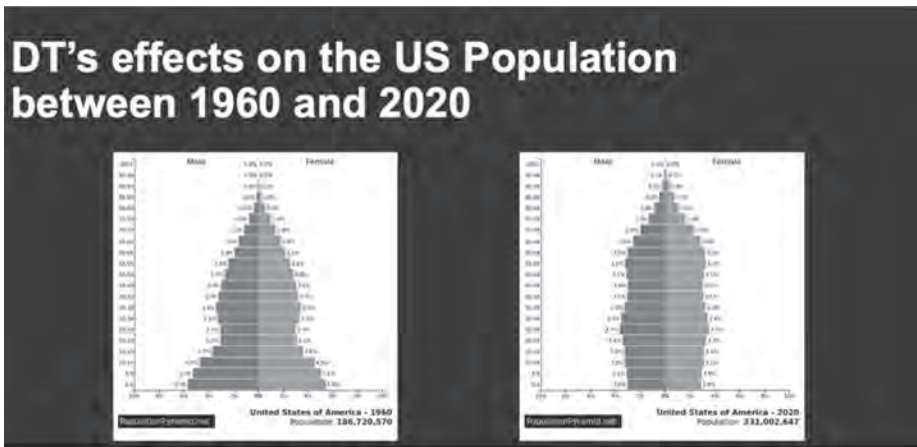


Figure 1: The DT of the US, 1960 to 2020

through the end of their fourth full year) and moving up. The blue bars are for males, the pink ones for females. In 1960 the first four cohorts from birth through the end of 19 years, are the four largest age groupings. Then there is a regression for about four cohorts,¹³ followed by a gradually slimming trend as people get older and more members of each cohort die.

A quite different image shows up in 2020. It vaguely resembles the Empire State Building, but its base is too narrow—no pyramid until you get to the top third. The youth cohorts under 20 are smaller than most of the cohorts until you get to the 60s and up! No hope for long-term growth here! But the graph is taller than 1960, because of the numbers of people living longer. The 1960 graph peaks with the 80–84 cohort while 2020 has cohorts up to 100. Not too long ago almost no one lived to 100. Today almost every pastor I know has had a member or members pass the century mark.

Before we leave the topic of the demographic transition, we must consider how it has affected us in other ways—its “indirect effects.” Our life experiences lead to certain assumptions. When we see such human accomplishments as better nutrition, better sanitation, and better medicine, we naturally begin to look at such things as science as the means to human well-being. If former generations thought first about priests and prayer when they got sick, we think of doctors and drugs. Our own actions to get our checkups, take our medicine, and plan our future are increasingly prioritized. That our lives are in the hands of God seems remote—even irrelevant. Missing meds is a bigger problem than missing church. It seems that what I do, more than God, determines my present and future well-being. Some call this a growing sense of self-efficacy.¹⁴ Whatever it is called, demographers show that across the globe, as the DT takes effect religiosity declines.

A more quantifiable indirect effect of this transition is the dramatic change in the lives of women. An obvious factor in the demographic transition is that pregnancies begin to be limited. Long before “the pill,” various types of contraception were employed as the DT began in Europe and America. Beside declining births, other results occur: sex no longer must result in pregnancy and the average woman’s life cycle is no longer as dominated by the care of children. There is a greater sense of sexual freedom—and a greater willingness to separate sex from marriage. And if a woman is only going to bear two children, then a far larger portion of her life can be devoted to other things such as education and careers or work outside the home.¹⁵ That also means that the average age for marriage is postponed and that an increasing number of people never marry.¹⁶ In 1950, 68 percent of all US women were married by age 24, today only 19 percent are married by that age. About 24 percent of women and over 30 percent of men have never married.¹⁷

That’s probably enough about the DT and its effects on the US population. But note well, as an American denomination, the LCMS reflects all of this. Most directly

relevant, the LCMS population is marked by fewer children and young people, and growing numbers of older people.

There is another demographic transformation taking place. Recall the quote from Taylor that the US “population is becoming majority non-white at the same time a record share is going gray.”¹⁸ The demographic *profile* of the United States is changing in terms of race and ethnicity. The United States is increasingly Black, Hispanic, and Asian. That’s especially evident from the past two US census surveys. In 2010, 72 percent of the US population was white, non-Hispanic. By 2020, the percentage of white-non-Hispanic Americans had declined to 61 percent, an 11-point change in a decade!¹⁹ When we look back farther, about 85 percent of the United States was non-Hispanic white in 1960. At that time, the largest minority group was African

American, with all other minorities under 5 percent of the United States.²⁰ By 2020 the United States was more than 40 percent minority, with Hispanics the largest single minority group, and Asians the fastest growing group.

Why is the demographic profile changing so dramatically? In a word: immigration.

Figure 4 nearby,²¹ from the US Census Bureau graphs the US immigrant population of since 1900 and is projected out to 2060. It shows that the total foreign-born population of the United States was 47.9 million in September 2022, an increase of 2.9 million from the previous September. The 14.6 percent immigrant share

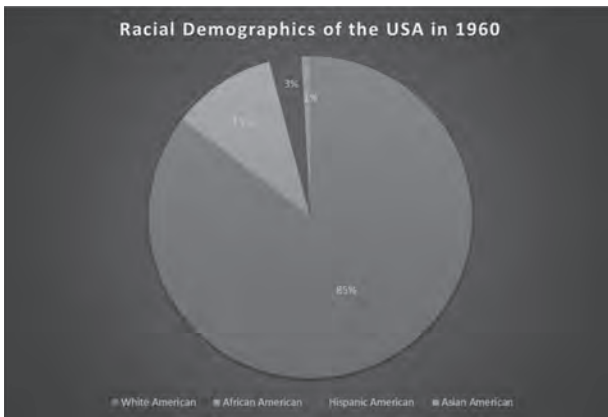


Figure 2: US Racial Demographics in 1960

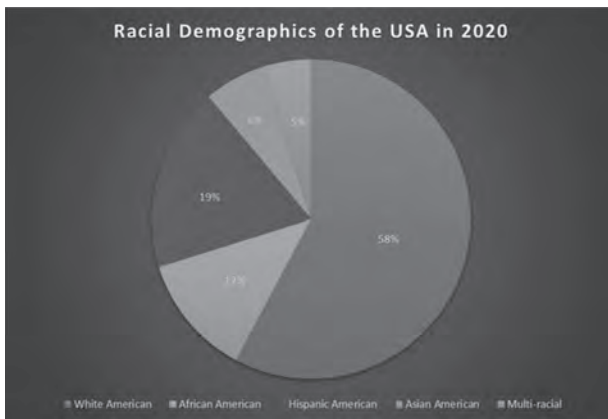


Figure 3: US Racial Demographics in 2020

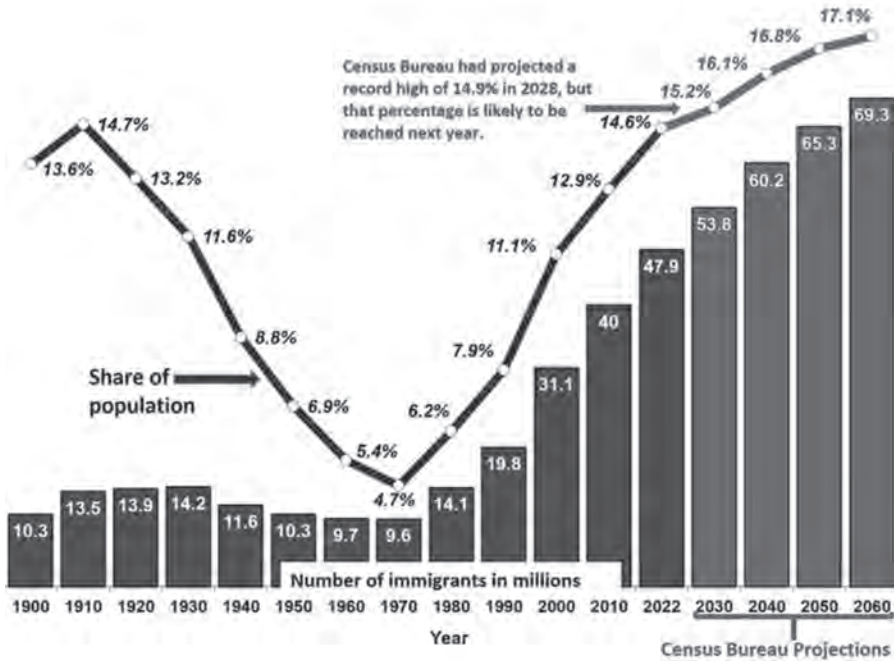


Figure 4: Immigrants in the US over time

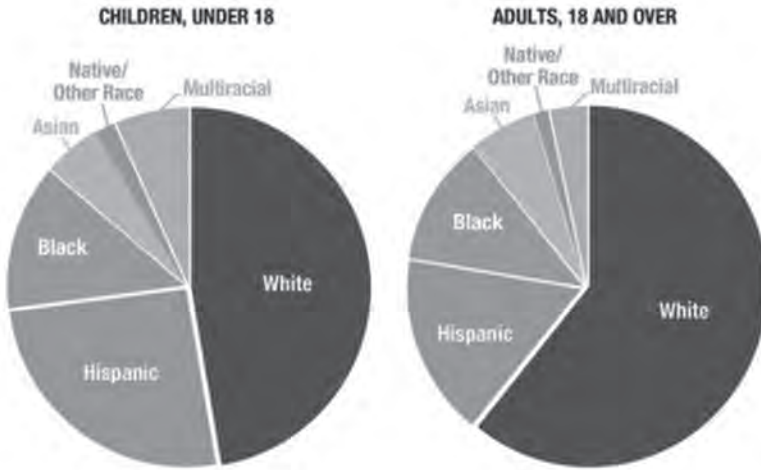
of the population is slightly below the all-time highs which occurred in 1910 during the great immigration surge from Europe to the United States.

The US population is increasingly made up of what we still refer to as minority groups. Especially when we look at children, we see how significant this movement is for the future. Figure 5 nearby²² uses pie-charts to illustrate this. The right circle shows adults 18 and over in the current population. You see they are about two-thirds of the population. But the circle on the left shows the US population under the age of 18. Less than half of the US population under the age of 18 is non-Hispanic White. Hispanics, Blacks, and other ethnic and racial groups are the category that makes up the rest of the population for young people. When it comes to our youth, we are majority minority.

Greater multiethnicity in American youth means that demographic momentum is toward ever-increasing diversity. Because the population below 18 is increasingly non-White, that population will be having more babies than the non-Hispanic White population even if birthrates are uniform across all ethnicities.²³

Demographics and religion

Significant religious change is occurring together with changes in the US population



Note: “Native/Other Race” category includes individuals who report native origins as well as those who report “some other race.” **Source:** U.S. Census 2020. **Analysis:** K.M. Johnson, Carsey School, University of New Hampshire.

Figure 5: US Population by Race/Ethnicity

toward aging and multiethnicity. These changes in demographics and religiosity are connected. I earlier hinted at a correlation between the demographic transition and declining religiosity. Because we trust increasingly in science and medicine as keys to human well-being, God is relegated to the periphery of life—a God of the gaps. Only when medicine starts to look uncertain do we resort to prayer. We have more of a pharma faith than faith in the Word. With longevity seemingly assured, we’re less inclined to think of life as a brief gift for which we’re accountable to our Creator, and more likely to be focused on fulfilling our bucket list. Ephraim Radnor calls our attitude “whistling past the grave.” He says:

Our complacent expectation of life’s longer duration breaks the body’s bridge to eternity. We know that we will die, but our awareness of longevity shifts it from a present reality to a distant horizon. We push death to the margins. It comes “at the end.” Life’s duration becomes something we imagine to be valuable for its own sake.²⁴

The this-worldly future consumes us, not the life everlasting that Christianity confesses. As a result, in the year 2000, 45 percent of all those sampled qualified as

practicing Christians, but now that share, according to Barna, is down to around 25 percent. And researchers define a practicing Christian as one who goes to church once a month or more—not exactly on fire with the Spirit.

There is also a correlation between religiosity and racial-ethnic diversity. Declining affiliation and attendance are most acute in the White denominations, both mainline and conservative. The decline of mainline denominations is severe and continuing, but in recent years, one of the fastest declining denominations has been the Southern Baptist Convention.²⁵ The LCMS, of course, is also experiencing a long-term decline in membership.

Some assume that immigration has caused decline in Christianity, assuming immigrants from non-Christian religions undermine the overall share of Christian adherents. It is true that many immigrants come from non-Christian backgrounds, but despite that, immigrants as a category are more likely to be Christian adherents than the rest of the US population.²⁶

LCMS Decline

All the foregoing demographic changes have directly affected the LCMS. The DT has led directly to LCMS decline. That is a decline in confirmed or adult membership and an even greater decline in baptized membership.

Another element of decline involves additions to the church, or “gains” (see

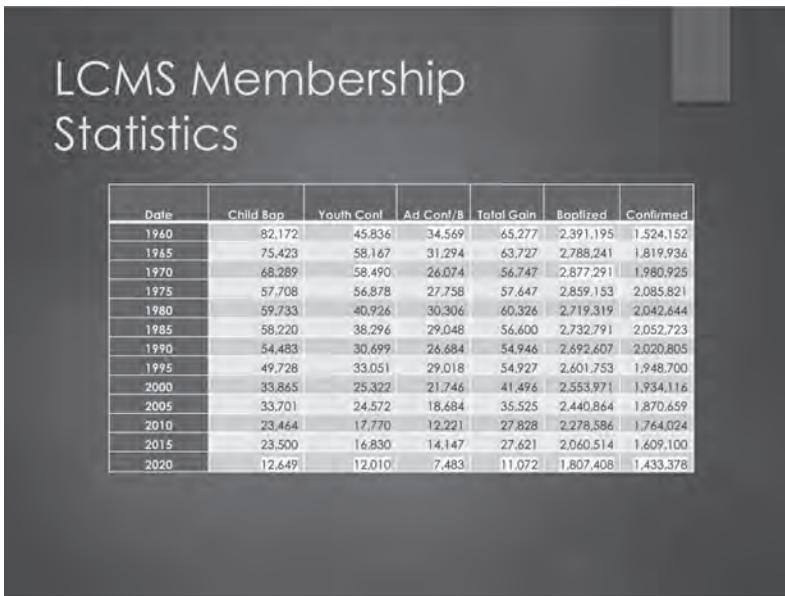


Figure 6: LCMS membership 1960–2020

Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod
Adherents as a Percentage of Total Population, 2010

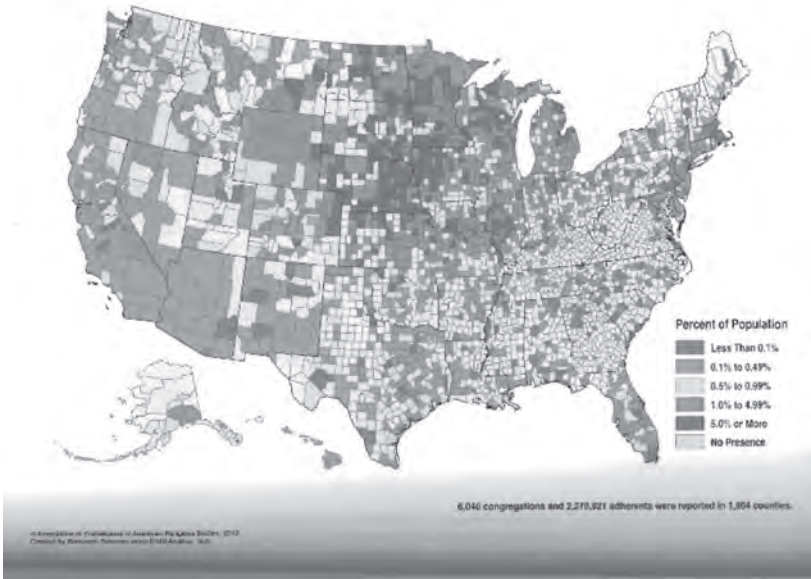


Figure 7: LCMS as percentage of US counties

Figure 6²⁷). Of course, every year people join the LCMS. But since 1960 we've experienced a huge decline in additions by child baptism, another sharp decline in new communicants via youth confirmation, a decline in adults gained from outside the Synod via either adult confirmation or conversion and adult baptism. So, the total gain from outside has shrunk dramatically from what it was in 1960. We went from 82,000 child baptisms in 1960 to 12,000 in 2020, from 45,800 youth confirmations in 1960 to 12,000 in 2020, and from 34,500 to 7,500 adult confirmations/baptisms. Thus, the total gains in membership for the LCMS in 2020 were only a fraction of the gains in 1960.

Figure 6 charts LCMS membership over 60 years, from 1960–2020. It shows that baptized membership peaked in 1970 at 2.877 million. Today it is 1.8 million. Our confirmed membership peaked in 1985 at 2.05 million, thanks largely to the confirmations of those babies baptized in the 1970s. In 2020 our confirmed membership was 1.4 million.

These are simply the facts—and cannot be ignored. Another fact that should be considered, is the location of the LCMS. Where are most of our congregations located? Figure 7, created by LCMS Rosters and Statistics, indicates that most of our

congregations are in the red, pink, and orange areas of the country—the Midwest. That is where we are strongest—which is no surprise. Like most of Lutheranism, we are a denomination located primarily in the upper Midwest. Of course we have congregations scattered throughout all fifty states, but no other region even comes close to our presence in the upper Midwest.

On this same map the white and green areas show where we are not present—at least not in any significant amount (from no members to less than one-half of one percent of the county population). Notice our total or relative absence along almost all the east coast, most of the eastern United States, the South, the Gulf Coast, the West Coast, and the Southwest. Note also that the two coasts are where US population is densest today—about 40 percent of the total US population lives within fifty miles of an ocean. America lives there, but the LCMS is largely missing.

There is another place where the LCMS is largely absent: America’s cities. For example, I studied the population of the LCMS in five American cities. Figure 8 provides a picture.²⁸ It shows that between 1968 and 2018 the LCMS experienced a dramatic decline in the number of members in five American cities—you might call it an urban rapture.

LCMS Decline in Five Cities (1968–2018)						
City	Members in 1968	Members in 2018	Amount of Decline	Adult Members 1968	Adult Members 2018	Amount of Decline
NYC	30,490	4,475	0.85	18,809	3,463	0.82
Chicago	55,028	5,630	0.90	38,850	4,494	0.88
LA	3,400	774	0.77	2,206	679	0.69
Houston	24,570	12,083	0.51	15,045	8,729	0.42
Detroit	48,949	4,229	0.91	32,801	3,133	0.90
TOTALS	162,437	27,191	0.83	107,711	20,498	0.81

Figure 8: Five examples of LCMS urban decline

The five cities I studied were New York City, Chicago, Los Angeles, Houston, and Detroit. I chose the first three because they were the three largest American cities in every census between 1960 and 2020. Houston has become the fourth largest American city and was in the top ten already in 1960 and every census thereafter. Detroit was the fifth largest city in 1960 and 1970, but it has now dropped to twenty-sixth place. Since my purpose was to study LCMS urban membership, I wanted also to see just what had happened in both America's largest cities and in cities where the LCMS once had significant numbers of members.²⁹

The decline of LCMS urban membership is staggering. In New York City, in 1968, we had 30,490 members. Fifty years later, we had 3,463, an 82 percent decline. In Chicago, we went from 55,000 plus members to 4,500, an 88 percent decline. In Los Angeles, we dropped from 3,400 members in 1968 to 774, a 77 percent decline. Houston, relatively speaking, is a bright spot, with LCMS membership dropping from 24,570 to 12,083, *only* a 51 percent decline. Detroit, however, experienced the most severe decline, from almost 49,000 members to 4,229, a 91 percent decline. Adult, or communicant membership declines in the five cities are also severe although slightly lower in percentage.

Chicago and Detroit were at one time centers of LCMS membership. No longer. And while you might object, saying that both Chicago and Detroit (especially Detroit!) have experienced overall population decline, the percentage of overall population losses for each city are far less than the LCMS population decline.³⁰

We left the cities in droves—and not only the five I studied most closely. I could have added other cities, including St. Louis. Or, Cleveland, Philadelphia, Baltimore—pretty much any northeastern or midwestern city you can name. The story is the same. The LCMS—being a mostly White denomination—joined the “white flight” from urban America. But please note, we didn't leave places where there were no people. We left because we viewed the changing neighborhoods as too risky for us. As urban LCMS membership declined, we transferred a lot of members to suburbs—so “white flight” does not explain our overall decline. We planted new suburban congregations. And, for that, thanks be to God. Nevertheless, our departure from the cities meant we had left the largest population centers of North America.

Ryan MacPherson and George Hawley on LCMS decline

I noted earlier that the LCMS has commissioned two studies of our decline, one by Ryan MacPherson and another by George Hawley.³¹ In a nutshell, McPherson argues that the cause of our decline is the declining birth rate of our members. MacPherson is a Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod scholar whose study has focused on the American family. An unapologetic defender of high fertility, he shows that the so-called Baby Boom did not burden American families economically, rather they prospered, and income inequality declined. He was asked to “provide

analysis and advice consistent with” LCMS doctrine and practice; to “identify the pertinent demographic factors” leading to that decline; to show how “trends in family dynamics” “have shaped the synod’s current trajectory”; and to “suggest possible courses of action for prudently addressing the synod’s numerical decline and financial struggles in a manner that integrates stewardship and evangelism with biblical teachings concerning the family.”³²

MacPherson’s study is valuable on many levels. Noting the impact of declining births he writes: “One factor has overpowered all other factors in the synod’s numerical decline: a plummeting birth rate during the 1960s, which never rebounded but instead fell further during the 1990s.”³³ He points out the decline in infant baptisms, emphasizes the importance of marriage and family life, and encourages intergenerational ministry. He is also bold enough to suggest that we have made too easy accommodations with divorce and birth control in the LCMS.³⁴ All of this is worthwhile. However, in focusing so much on internal growth (handing down the faith), he gives scant attention to outreach (handing on the faith).³⁵ This is particularly true of his easy dismissal of outreach to Hispanics as a factor in LCMS decline and, moreover, ignores the fact that American ethnic/racial diversity overall extends well beyond Hispanic Americans.³⁶

George Hawley, in a much more extensive pair of studies that he did for the LCMS also emphasizes low fertility as the primary cause of decline. Hawley’s study is also extremely valuable. It is far more data-driven than MacPherson’s work. In one study he digs deeply into our districts.³⁷ In the second he considers LCMS presence in the counties of the United States.³⁸ His conclusions are helpful. He too rightly emphasizes declining birthrates, but he also points out our problematic geography, noting that the counties LCMS adherents disproportionately found tend to be those counties that are also experiencing population loss. He notes that youth are moving to cities and other areas with minimal LCMS presence.

Throughout his two studies, Hawley provides beneficial data and observations regarding LCMS strengths and weaknesses. He notes our heavy decline in the Northeast, Midwest, and West Coast together with greater strength in the South, although even there, we’re still struggling, and our growth appears largely because of the number of retirees who have moved to warmer climates.

Hawley, like MacPherson, makes recommendations. He offers strategies for internal growth, supporting the idea of early marriage and young families. While Hawley mentions the growing diversity of the United States, he gives that only minimal attention and voices skepticism that the LCMS could effectively reach beyond our ethnic profile. His major suggestion for external growth is for the LCMS to focus on counties that have demographic profiles that are similar to our current LCMS population.

I consider Hawley’s skepticism about intercultural outreach to be problematic for

several reasons, but one is because of Hawley's own later research. Hawley went on to publish a book a year after having done his work for the LCMS. The book looks at denominations in North America.³⁹ While Hawley's research for the LCMS is focused almost entirely on the factor of birthrate and family formation, his later book is far more balanced in its view of what is causing decline in most denominations. His careful research in *Demography, Culture, Decline* reveals that there is a modestly significant correlation between low fertility and denominational decline. Two other facts, however, have a stronger correlation with declining membership. Those denominations with the deepest levels of member devotion are less likely to be in numerical decline.⁴⁰ "Most denominations that include a large majority declaring that religion is very important in their lives are growing, or at least declining very slowly."⁴¹ The correlation between lower devotion and denominational decline is higher than the correlation with low fertility.

The third factor in denominational decline that Hawley discusses is diversity—or the lack of ethnic and racial diversity in a denomination. Lack of diversity has a much, much higher correlation than either low fertility or low devotion.⁴² Statistically speaking, Hawley shows that the level of correlation between decline and low fertility is the lowest level of statistical significance, a 0.5 correlation. For decline and lower devotion, the correlation is a bit higher at 0.53. But the correlation between decline and lack of diversity is a very high 0.7.⁴³ Hawley writes, "We see compelling evidence that those denominations that are less white tend to shrink at a slower rate or even grow."⁴⁴ Yet, despite "compelling evidence," Hawley is lukewarm about increasing ethnic diversity in a church.⁴⁵

Harbingers of Hope

Given the general decline of Christianity and Synod's particular decline, are there any harbingers of hope in terms of denominational growth? Yes, there are. Membership decline is widespread, but it is not true of all Christian churches. The healthiest church bodies are those that have either a high rate of fertility or a high percentage of members who are from non-White or immigrant populations.

The Amish are a comparatively small religious group with about 400,000 members in the United States. But they are growing at a rate that promises to double their numbers every twenty years. They are the best example of internal growth. The average Amish woman bears five or more children in her lifetime. The Amish also retain about 85 percent of their youth.⁴⁶ They have minimal growth from outside, however, since the Amish forbid marriage to outsiders and do not evangelize.

Amish growth rates far exceed the Mormons, but the Latter-Day Saints (LDS) also continue to grow. Mormon women also have significantly higher birthrates than the US averages, although LDS total fertility rate is also declining. Moreover, LDS outreach has little success and membership retention has declined in recent decades, resulting in a significant slowdown in growth.⁴⁷

Are any other denominations growing? Two more deserve particular attention. They are two of the most diverse church bodies. Seventh-day Adventists (7DA) and Assemblies of God (AoG) churches are both experiencing consistent, ongoing membership growth. As of 2024, the 7DA are the fastest growing denomination.⁴⁸ They have experienced consistent growth, and their membership is about 63 percent minority.⁴⁹

Close to them in growth, although significantly larger, is the AoG which has grown from a Christian fringe group to one of the ten largest denominations—and the only one among the top ten to be growing. The AoG is also remarkable for its diversity—at 45 percent non-white. This, of course, far exceeds the diversity of the United States as a whole.⁵⁰

When one considers the important changes taking place in the US demographic profile in terms of race and ethnicity, it is no mystery that the best examples of denominational growth are also the most diverse denominations. The importance of ethnic diversity is also evident in a denomination that is *not* growing.

Which denomination has lost the most church members in America? The answer is the Roman Catholic Church (RCC)—by a mile. The RCC has bled members in recent decades. There are so many former Catholics—forty million!—that they exceed the total membership of the four largest Protestant or Evangelical churches. About half of all those raised Catholic have left the church.⁵¹ On top of that, many who still claim to be Catholic attend Mass infrequently and have little respect for clergy and for central RCC teachings.⁵²

Given such striking problems, one would expect the RCC to be experiencing a precipitous membership decline. But, while the Roman church does appear to be in decline, its overall membership decline is far less than Protestantism's losses. Indeed, recent Vatican data suggests a modest growth in the number of American Catholics and an international rate of growth that exceeds the percentage of overall population growth.⁵³ Huge losses in the United States, yet modest growth or—at the very least—only modest overall decline. How can that be? The answer is obvious. The RCC in the United States has incorporated the “new America” into its membership. About 40 percent of all American Catholics today are non-white.⁵⁴

Is There Hope for a Church Like Ours?

We aren't Roman Catholic—who have a natural “in” with Hispanics. We aren't AoG Pentecostals—who can send out hundreds of minimally trained pastors and evangelists out to plant churches. We're not 7DA with their fine-tuned evangelistic training.

How about a church body that holds to the inerrancy of the Scriptures? And one that is socially conservative on all the controversial issues involving human sexuality? And what if that church body ordains only men? That's a little bit more like us, isn't it?

That church body had its beginning in 1973 when white congregations south of the Mason-Dixon line left a denomination that had adopted theologically liberal positions on numerous topics. But another factor that led to the departure was an unwillingness to accept the Civil Rights Movement and integration, as the PCA's own historians have admitted.

That church body is the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA). It has grown numerically almost every year since its inception. Its growth has taken it far beyond the Mason-Dixon line. It is no longer a southern denomination. And, remarkably, the PCA is now over 20 percent minority. Its largest minority delegation is Asian—Korean to be exact. But it has also added significant numbers of Hispanic and Black members. Although it is still much smaller than the LCMS, it has about as many Black pastors as the Synod. And, unlike the LCMS, the PCA now has a strong presence in cities, including the cities of the Northeast and New York City in particular.⁵⁵

How can it be that a denomination that started out in mostly small towns throughout the South has become a denomination with a powerful urban presence? How could the PCA, with a membership that was nearly all white, have become about four times more diverse than the LCMS?

One must point out that the PCA has maintained a consistent priority on theological fidelity. It has continued to emphasize biblical authority and the Reformation doctrines of salvation by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone. And it has made outreach—church planting, missions, evangelism—its central priority. This has led to two decisive turning points in the PCA journey: first, an honest admission of the racism that was a factor in its inception together with an emphatic denunciation of it; and second, a firm commitment to live up to its name as a church “in America,” and with that prioritization of reaching out to all regions and peoples.

The admission of racism was stark. Already in 1977, a group of PCA leaders declared:

We are convinced that we, as Reformed Christians, have failed to speak and act boldly in the area of race relations. Our denominational profiles reveal patterns of ethnic and racial homogeneity. We believe that this situation fails to give adequate expression to the saving purposes of our sovereign God, whose covenant extends to all peoples and races. We are convinced that our record in this crucial area is one of racial brokenness and disobedience.⁵⁶

In effect, the PCA acknowledged that it was wrong to oppose the integration of churches and communities. They acknowledged that they could not be a church that's

for white southerners. It was wrong because it contradicted the Lord's command to make disciples of the nations.

The second important turning point was a firm commitment to live up to their name and be a church for all of America. Without minimizing in any way the PCA's commitment to biblical fidelity and conservative theology, in 1998 a group of twenty-seven PCA pastors (including such men as Frank M. Barker, James Montgomery Boice, William Edgar, Tim Keller, Tremper Longman, Donald J. MacNair, Vern Poythress, and R. C. Sproul) published a short but powerful booklet titled *A Statement of Identity for the Presbyterian Church in America*. *The Statement of Identity* declared the importance of reaching people in their own language and understanding their cultures. It affirmed the need for raising up "indigenous" ministers. And, perhaps most boldly of all, it declared that missions and church plants in America's urban centers should be the "highest" mission priority for the denomination.⁵⁷ This was not just talk. It describes the subsequent growth of the PCA. For example, today there are scores of PCA congregations in the metro New York area—outgrowths of Redeemer PCA in Brooklyn, founded by Tim Keller.

Summary of Christianity and Demography

To summarize, there has been an overall decline in religiosity especially for all mainline denominations, but also for most conservative church bodies such as the SBC and the LCMS. Although Evangelicalism as a movement is far stronger than most denominations, it too is experiencing decline despite the significant inflows from mainline and other denominations. The great exception to religious decline is among non-White Christians and therefore the most diverse denominations. Although much of the statistical story is depressing, the health of the PCA is a reminder that there is a way forward for conservative denominations.

Demographics and Catholicity

What does demographics have to do with catholicity?

Earlier, I pointed out the fine print in the note that follows the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds in our hymnals: "*Christian*: the ancient text reads 'catholic,' meaning the whole church, as it confesses the wholeness of Christian doctrine." Not a bad definition. Catholic means "the whole church, as it confesses the wholeness of Christian doctrine." Therefore, when we say catholic, we absolutely do not mean the Roman Catholic Church since we mean the *whole* church. The whole church is all the baptized believers of every family and tribe and language and color and time and place and on and on. That is the catholic church. And the catholic church—the whole church—is God's holy church "as it confesses the wholeness of Christian doctrine." It holds to "all that I have commanded you" (Mt 28:20).

You might say that such catholicity is already wrapped up in saying that the church is one and holy and apostolic. It is certainly true that each of these Nicene attributes reinforces the other three, and each of them ultimately end up with the church that is described in the Scriptures. But each of these individual attributes of the church is also important. Each is distinctive.

The church is distinctively “one.” The church is united by the power of the Holy Spirit in Christ Jesus the Lord by his blood (1 Cor 12:12). The church is “holy” because it consists of those who are washed, sanctified, and justified in the name of the Lord Jesus (1 Cor 6:11). And the church is “apostolic” because it is devoted to the apostles’ teaching (Acts 2:42), built on the foundation of the apostles (Eph 2:20; 1 Cor 2:12). And “catholic” is also distinctive. I would add that it is a vital word for us today.

The distinctiveness of catholicity

The adjective καθολικός is a combination of κατά (“about”) with ὅλος (“whole”) and thus carries the sense of “wholeness.” It summarizes the truth of the Great Commission, go to the whole world, to all the nations. Teach the whole truth, everything I’ve commanded.

The term catholic enters Christian vocabulary as early as Ignatius of Antioch (died c. AD 108/140), who writes, “wherever Jesus Christ is, there is the Catholic Church.”⁵⁸ Catholic anticipates that great, unnumberable multitude of Revelation 7:9, “from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and tongues.” Catholic emphasizes the expansive reach of the gospel—a reach that goes beyond “my demographic” to include those who seem so different from me. As such, catholic amplifies a vital truth.

Cyril of Jerusalem explains why the word catholic is such an important descriptor of the church.

It is called “catholic” then because it extends over all the world, from one end of the earth to the other, and because it teaches universally and completely one and all the doctrines that ought to come to human knowledge, concerning things both visible and invisible, heavenly and earthly. It is also called “catholic” because it brings into subjection to godliness the whole race of humankind, governors and governed, learned and unlearned, and because it universally treats and heals the whole class of sins that are committed by soul or body and possesses in itself every form of virtue that is named, both in deeds and words and in every kind of spiritual gifts.⁵⁹

To summarize: that the church is catholic means that it has the whole saving truth

that the whole human race needs. It means the truth of Christ for all the nations.

This also means that catholicity is cruciform if you will. The catholic church has a vertical dimension because it encompasses the wholeness of God's truth as it is handed down from generation to generation—from heaven to humanity through the prophets and apostles. Catholic truth is confessed not just with those in our sanctuary on Sunday morning, but with angels and archangels and the whole company of heaven (Rv 7). Its message is glad tidings of great joy for all the people—the joyful gospel of Jesus Christ, the Savior of all the world.

The message from heaven to all people means catholicity has not only a vertical, but also a horizontal dimension. Thus, it is cruciform! It extends horizontally toward every tribe and nation. This truth is not just for us and our children, but “for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call” (Acts 2:39).

Vertical and horizontal catholicity is genuine catholicity. That the whole creedal truth of the Christian faith is for all the world means that mission is definitional for the church. This is amply evident in the narrative Luke provides in the Acts of the Apostles.

Luke traces the movement of the church from Jerusalem to Judea to Samaria to Rome and beyond. In his narrative he mentions numbers repeatedly because—well—people can be counted. In so doing Luke connects demographics and catholicity.

As Jaroslav Pelikan in his commentary on the book of Acts says,

There is therefore undeniably some sense in which “catholic” as an attribute of the church does carry an almost statistical connotation, so that the fulfillment already within human history of the eschatological vision of “a great multitude which no man could number from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and tongues,” (Rv 7:9), as faith in the gospel has spread to all the continents and to the islands of the sea, is also the concrete realization of the catholicity that was predicated of the church already in some of its earliest creeds.”⁶⁰

The concept of catholicity is replete in Scripture even though the terms catholic or catholicity are not present. The Hebrew Scriptures reveal that all the world has only one, true God—Creator of all things and all people. The fall is a universal fall. Israel can rightly claim this fiercely monotheistic God who scandalously chooses Abraham and his family but dares not forget that in the choice of this man and his descendants, the one God intends to bless all the world. God chooses Abraham not as personal privilege, but that his descendant might bless all the Earth's families (see Genesis 1–3; 12:3; 22:18 and Romans 5:12;).

This is only amplified in the New Testament where Acts traces the catholic church as it expands from Jews to Gentiles throughout the Roman world. Paul

proclaims an inclusive gospel for all people through the One who died for all. Revelation foretells a new creation with every tribe and nation gathered around God and the Lamb.

Catholicity in both dimensions is important in the early church. I have already mentioned Ignatius and Cyril, but let me offer just one more example. Augustine writes,

We constitute the Church, but I do not say we in such a way as to include only those who are here, who now hear me. I include as many faithful Christians as are here by the grace of God in this Church, that is, in this city, as many as are in this region, as many as are in this province, as many as are across the sea, as many as are in the whole world, since from the rising of the sun into the going down of the same, the name of the Lord is worthy of praise. Thus the Catholic Church, our true mother, true bride of her spouse, exists today. Let us honor her because she is the bride of so great a Lord. To honor the Catholic Church is to honor the bride of Christ.

Early church catholicity foregoes neither the vertical nor the horizontal dimensions of the catholic church. Indeed, these two aspects are mutually dependent since the one gospel of one God at work in Christ (vertical catholicity) is the means of salvation for the entire world and all its peoples. Without such a catholic faith there is no church catholic.

Maintaining both the vertical and horizontal is a corrective against false views. The vertical catholic dimension of the whole truth prevents the inclusive mission to all nations from becoming rank universalism. And the horizontal emphasis on mission to every tribe and nation is necessary to correct any tendency toward an ecclesial institutionalism or sectarianism, such as what happens when catholic becomes limited only to what is Roman. Thomas, for example, notes the worldwide aspect of the catholic church, its inclusion of all the conditions of man, its universality in time. But then he argues that, in the end, the church is only catholic because of its connection to Rome. Only when it is Roman is the church catholic for Thomas.⁶¹

Such a narrowed catholicity is what the Reformation encountered. A central part of the challenge Luther faced was, of course, the doctrine of the church. More specifically, as the Reformation proceeded, it had to address the false understanding of the church's universality—its catholicity. Luther inherited a customary German rendering of the term catholic with the word "Christian." He adds this gloss in his "The Three Symbols or Creeds of the Christian Faith":

"Christian" [*Catholica*] can have no better translation than

“Christian,” as was done heretofore. That is, although Christians are to be found in the whole world, the pope rages against that and wants to have his court alone called the Christian Church. He lies, however, like his idol, the devil.⁶²

From this quote, we see that Luther was accepting an earlier practice of preferring Christian (*christliche*) in place of catholic (*katholische*). His reference to “as was done heretofore,” shows that the practice predates Luther. Moreover, for Luther, the substitution of “Christian” for “catholic” helped him to affirm what I am calling *horizontal* catholicity. Since Rome had co-opted the term catholic, a substitution was required to reclaim the truth of catholicity. Since Christians are to be found “in the whole world” Luther opposes the papacy’s false claim that its sovereignty defines catholicity. Gordon Jensen writes: “Luther sought to recover the apostolic message of the gospel as a condition of the church’s catholicity.”⁶³

In other ways also Luther shows his affirmation of catholicity. Among the most important is that he restores the vernacular principle of translating Scripture and liturgy—something that began with the writing of the New Testament in Greek instead of the Aramaic or Hebrew of Jesus and the first disciples. The importance of translation into the vernacular continued for centuries in the early church.

The restoration of translation following Luther has had inestimable significance for the horizontal expansion of the gospel among the nations of the world, as the late Lamin Sanneh, for example, has shown so beautifully.⁶⁴

Luther also emphasizes the concept of catholicity in many writings. I can touch on only a couple. In 1520 he writes of the church’s inclusion of all who live in true faith throughout all the world:

Christendom means an assembly of all the people on earth who believe in Christ, as we pray in the Creed, “I believe in the Holy Spirit, the communion of saints.” This community or assembly means *all those who live in true faith, hope, and love*. . . I believe that *throughout the whole wide world* there is only one holy, universal, Christian church, which is nothing other than the gathering or congregation of saints—[righteous] believers on earth.⁶⁵

And again, in the Large Catechism he reminds us that we pray for the catholic expanse of the church in the Lord’s Prayer when we ask for God’s name to be hallowed so “that it may find approval and *gain followers among other people and advance with power throughout the world*.” And “Dear Father, we pray, give us first Your Word, so that the Gospel may be preached properly *throughout the world*.”⁶⁶

Our confessions also affirm catholicity. As Robert Kolb says, “Melancthon established the catholicity of the Lutherans by confessing the doctrine of the Trinity”

in AC I, only to continue to argue that the Reformers stood firmly in the teachings of the church through the ages (vertical catholicity).⁶⁷ And, as noted early, Apology VII and VIII explicitly affirms the horizontal dimension of catholicity:

This [third] article in the Creed presents these consolations to us: so that we may not despair, but may know that the church will nevertheless remain; so that we may know that however great the multitude of the ungodly is, nevertheless the church exists and Christ bestows those gifts that he promised to the church: forgiveness of sins, answered prayer, the gift of the Holy Spirit. *Moreover, it says “church catholic” so that we not understand the church to be an external government of certain nations. It consists rather of people scattered throughout the entire world who agree on the gospel and have the same Christ, the same Holy Spirit, and the same sacraments, whether or not they have the same human traditions.*⁶⁸

In later Lutheranism, however, especially during the period of Lutheran Orthodoxy, catholicity tended to be emphasized only in terms of its vertical dimension, on the faith as it has been handed down. Without denigrating that emphasis in any way, it is unfortunate that the horizontal dimension of catholicity with its emphasis on the church’s call to all nations and peoples is largely absent.

Walther stands in that tradition, but also is distinct from it because of his emphasis on the mission of the church. In his *Church and Office* (or *Church and Ministry*), he has only a single mention of horizontal catholicity, in a quotation from Georg Zeämann who writes about the catholic church as “being spread throughout the world in all particular churches.”⁶⁹

What is at best implicit in Walther is explicit in the work of Wilhelm Loehe, who “was an ardent and explicit proponent of mission with a vigorous sense of the catholicity of the church.”⁷⁰ In his three books on the church Loehe writes:

The Church of the New Testament is no longer a territorial church but a church of all people. A church which has its children in all lands and gathers them from every nation. It is the one flock of the one shepherd, called out of many folds (Jn 10:16), the universal—the truly catholic—church which flows through all time and into which all people pour.⁷¹

He adds: “this is the thought which must permeate the mission of the church.” And “Mission is the life of the catholic church.”⁷² So Loehe insists that the Lutheran Church has a calling to be truly catholic, sharing its catholic faith with all the world, living “with its light upon a stand so that all nations may rejoice over this refuge for the suffering, over this church which has freely received and freely gives that which makes men blessed.”⁷³

Thus, there is no denial of either the vertical or horizontal dimensions in the LCMS heritage. Nevertheless, I would argue that there's been an overall neglect of catholicity in the Synod's history. Our worship books throughout our history have followed the German custom of substituting Christian for catholic in the creeds and only recently offered a fine-printed nod to the richness of the term we replaced.

And we cannot argue that Christian is a synonym for catholic. Catholic is a different word. Our ears have been attuned to speaking only about a Christian church, which in a way is kind of a tautology. What other kind of church is there?

We miss hearing and speaking the truth that the church is for all the nations. We do not emphasize that the church is—*by definition*—made up of all kinds of people from all sorts of backgrounds, from every color, from every land (or neighborhood), tribe, and nation, from every economic class, and on and on.

What we miss in worship, we also miss in most of our catechisms—our synodical catechisms, that is. There too the catholic attribute has been either ignored or given minimal attention. And even the topic of mission has been neglected as a doctrinal topic in them. In older editions of our synodical catechism, you find little or no attention to catholicity or to missions. At best, catholic is mentioned only in passing.⁷⁴ Similarly, our dogmatic texts have seldom gone beyond brief comments about catholic as meaning universal with little expansion beyond that.

Admittedly, my view may be criticized as too harsh. Perhaps. But at the very least, we in the LCMS have given minimal attention to the doctrine of the catholicity of the church. Does that neglect matter? Yes, it does. The transnational, multiethnic, astounding diversity and expansive character of the church dare not be neglected or ignored. *The church from the beginning is for all nations!* To neglect or forget that will inevitably lead to restricted view of the church—ethnically or racially or linguistically or in terms of a particular culture.

Mission cannot simply be a project over here or over there. The whole nature of the church is that it is reaching out to *all* people. We cannot be satisfied when “missions” or “evangelism” means planting congregations where people are most like us. Such a pattern is a repudiation of the catholic church that we confess.

Thank God that throughout our history we have had an appreciation of world missions. There we have been able to see the church's catholic dimension in the faces of Christians from every continent and color. But “world missions” has also to point us to the nations in our midst.

My first call out of seminary was to a congregation where the district president told me on call night, “You have a couple of years or we're going to close it.” I was in Queens in New York City. We had zero desire to go to New York. Neither did we have any special aptitude—we were a white, small-town, midwestern family placed in a Black, urban setting.

But the Word of God is powerful. You preach, you teach, you reach, you

visit, you talk to people, you listen to people. And thanks be to God, differences are overcome because of one faith and baptism. Mistakes were plentiful. Failure ubiquitous. Satan relentless. But the church grows across cultural divides in the mystery of God the Spirit. It is not our doing. Not us. “Greater is He that is in you, than he that is in the world” (1 Jn 4:4).

The word of God is strong. But it is too often silenced. Catholicity points us to the nations in our midst. It directs us back to urban centers and other locales where other nations and peoples are gathered.

Robert Kolb can help. He also writes about vertical and horizontal, but he speaks of the church at its root as being a matter of a vertical relationship because God joins us to his family. And then he talks about the royal priesthood as vertical but also horizontal because the royal priesthood is how the church shares its word with others and lives together with fellow believers.⁷⁵

Leo Sánchez adds an important warning. He has written specifically about the topic of unity and catholicity. He reminds us that catholicity is of the *esse* of the church. Not merely the *bene esse*, but the *esse*. Not if you feel like it but essential to the church’s authenticity. He reminds us that “any discourse on synodical unity that does not take stock of the catholicity of the church past and present is saying too little.” Such catholicity takes various ethnic, cultural, and linguistic forms but also contributes to the church at large through liturgical expression, pastoral practice, and gifts of theological reflection proper.⁷⁶

Yes, catholicity matters!

It makes clear that the faith of the apostles is the faith that is delivered to all of humanity. It identifies an ever-present danger, the temptation to claim Christianity is only for us and people like us.

We need to hear catholicity confessed again and again, because I am most comfortable with people like me. It’s true. I’m homogeneous. I connect most easily with people who reflect my likes and dislikes. Of course I do.

But God is not homogeneous. And his church is not homogeneous. And thanks be to God. When you are part of the church you discover that heterogeneous is way better. What a gift. What a gift that the world is not all like me. Thanks be to God!

Yes, catholicity matters. And catholicity matters for us in the LCMS, because while increasingly the US population is Black, Hispanic, Asian, and immigrant, the Synod is not. We are not reflecting the new America. We are not gathering the harvest.

That’s why this kind of gathering—this *multiethnic* gathering—is so important. Thanks be to God for this. Thank God for the hearts of people who recognize that in the variety of humanity who worship one God the depth of God’s love is seen so beautifully.

God’s word proclaims the church catholic, the church of and for all the nations. His word can open our hearts to the joyful truth that Christ’s church includes every

color and language and people. Take heart. Despite all our sins and failures, we not only believe in, but we are part of that very church—the holy catholic church.

Endnotes

- 1 See, e.g., Divine Service, Setting One, *Lutheran Service Book (LSB)*, (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2006), 158–159, emphasis added.
- 2 Athanasian Creed, verses 1, 19, and 40, LSB, 319–320, emphasis added.
- 3 See, e.g., Divine Service, Setting One, LSB, 158–159.
- 4 Apology of the Augsburg Confession (Ap), VII & VIII, 7, KW 175.
- 5 Ap XXIV, 6, KW 258.
- 6 AC V, 2, KW 40, emphasis added.
- 7 Kristen Einertson, “Tradition: Handing Down the Light to the Next Generation,” *Grapho: Concordia Seminary Student Journal* vol. 4, no. 1 (2002): 15–20. Available at: <https://scholar.csl.edu/grapho/vol4/iss1/2>
- 8 Paul Taylor, *The Next America: Boomers, Millennials, and the Looming Generational Showdown* (New York: Public Affairs, 2014), 1.
- 9 For a few sources on the demographic transition, see Ronald D. Lee, “The Demographic Transition: Three Centuries of Fundamental Change,” *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 17, no. 4 (2003): 167–90. For fuller discussions of demographic decline see Darrell Bricker and John Ibbitson, *Empty Planet: The Shock of Global Population Decline* (New York: Broadway Books, 2019); Tim Dyson, *Population and Development: The Demographic Transition* (London: Zed Books, 2010); Jonathan V. Last, *What to Expect When No One’s Expecting: America’s Coming Demographic Disaster* (New York: Encounter Books, 2013); Clint Laurent, *Tomorrow’s World: A Look at the Demographic and Socio-Economic Structure of the World in 2032* (Singapore: Wiley, 2013); Phillip Longman, *The Empty Cradle: How Falling Birthrates Threaten World Prosperity and What to Do About It* (New York: Basic Books, 2004); George Magnus, *The Age of Aging: How Demographics Are Changing the Global Economy and Our World* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2009). See also the section on the DT in Larry M. Vogel, “Behind the Numbers: A Traditional Church Faces a New America” (2023). PhD dissertation. 146. <https://scholar.csl.edu/phd/146>, chapter 1, 12–56.
- 10 Sara Hertog, Patrick Gerland, and John Wilmoth, United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs Policy Briefs (June 15, 2023), <https://doi.org/10.18356/27081990-153>.
- 11 Andrea Wognar, India’s Ageing Population: Why It Matters More Than Ever, UNFPA India (Dec. 23, 2023), <https://india.unfpa.org/en/news/indias-ageing-population-why-it-matters-more-ever#:~:text=While%20India%20has%20the%20highest,staggering%20347%20million%20by%202050>.
- 12 Sources: “United States of America, 1960,” <https://www.populationpyramid.net/united-states-of-america/1960/>. “United States of America, 2020,” <https://www.populationpyramid.net/united-states-of-america/2020/>.
- 13 The regression is due to declining births during the Depression and World War II.
- 14 See Vogel, “Behind the Numbers,” 32–39.
- 15 One study indicates that before the demographic transition the average woman spent about 70% of her lifespan nurturing pre-adolescent children, but the average woman after the DT spends only about 17% of her life caring for children. Lee, “Demographic Transition,” 167.
- 16 Sara McLanahan, “Diverging Destinies: How Children are Faring Under the Second Demographic Transition,” *Demography* 41 (2004), 607, notes: “The primary trends of the second transition include delays in fertility and marriage; increases in cohabitation, divorce, and nonmarital childbearing; and increases in maternal employment (Lesthaeghe 1995; Lesthaeghe and Surkyn 1988; Mason and Jensen 1995).” See also Taylor, *Next America*, 107–124, and Dyson, *Population*, 170–179.
- 17 US Census Bureau data compiled by the Population Reference Bureau (PRB) for the years 1940–2010. See Linda A. Jacobsen, Mark Mather, and Genevieve Dupuis, “Household Change in the United States,” PRB (September 25, 2012), <https://www.prb.org/resources/household-change-in-the-united-states>. See also Alicia VanOrman and Linda A. Jacobsen, “U.S. Household Composition Shifts as the Population Grows

Older; More Young Adults Live with Parents,” PRB (February 12, 2020), <https://www.prb.org/resources/u-s-household-composition-shifts-as-the-population-grows-older-more-young-adults-live-with-parents/>.

18 Taylor, *The Next America*, 1.

19 Data from US Census Bureau for 2010 and 2020. See also Jones, et al., “Racial and Ethnic Composition.”

20 See Nicholas Jones, et al. “Measuring the Racial and Ethnic Composition and Diversity of the United States Population: Historical Challenges and Contemporary Opportunities,” in: *Race, Ethnicity, and Economic Statistics for the 21st Century*, National Bureau of Economic Research. (2024), <https://ideas.repec.org/h/nbr/nberch/14954.html>.

21 Graph from Stephen Camarota and Karen Ziegler, Center for Immigration Studies, Foreign-born Population Hits Nearly 48 Million in September 2022 (Oct 27, 2022), at <https://cis.org/Report/ForeignBorn-Population-Hits-Nearly-48-Million-September-2022>. Source of data: Decennial Census for 1900 to 2000, American Community Survey for 2010, September Current Population Survey (CPS) for 2022. See also USCB Census Projections Through 2060 at <https://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/publications/2020/demo/p25-1144.pdf>.

22 Kenneth Johnson, New Census Reflects Growing U.S. Population Diversity, with Children in the Forefront, University of New Hampshire: Carsey School of Public Policy (Oct 6, 2021), <https://carsey.unh.edu/publication/new-census-reflects-growing-us-population-diversity-children-forefront>.

23 In fact, however, the White population has a lower birthrate than almost all minority populations except for Asians. For that reason, the Asian portion of the chart is the only minority category that is slightly smaller in the under 18 chart compared to over 18.

24 “Whistling Past the Grave,” *First Things*, November 2016, <https://www.firstthings.com/article/2016/11/whistling-past-the-grave>.

25 SBC membership has declined for 17 consecutive years. But church attendance and baptisms increased in 2023 for the first time in recent years. Aaron Earls, “Southern Baptist Membership Decline Slows, Baptisms and Attendance Grows,” Lifeway Research (May 7, 2024), <https://research.lifeway.com/2024/05/07/southern-baptist-membership-decline-slows-baptisms-and-attendance-grow/>.

26 Pew Research Center, “Immigrants,” in “U.S. Religious Landscape Survey: Christians Decline Sharply as Share of Population; Unaffiliated and Other Faiths Continue to Grow,” (2015), <https://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/immigrant-status/immigrants/>. This is also true in Europe, see Vogel, “Behind the Numbers,” 85–92.

27 See the LCMS *Statistical Yearbook*, published yearly by the Department of Human Resources until 1994 and the statistical data published yearly in *The Lutheran Annual*, from the years since 1994.

28 LCMS membership data was drawn from *Statistical Yearbooks* and *Lutheran Annuals*.

29 See Wikipedia, “List of Most Populous Cities in the United States by Decade,” last edited on 26 October 2022, at 20:58 (UTC), https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_most_populous_cities_in_the_United_States_by_decade#1980.

30 New York City, Los Angeles, and Houston have all grown since 1968 (Houston by 87%, which helps explain our more minimal losses there). Chicago’s population declined by 18%, but we lost 90% of our members. Detroit’s population dropped by 58%; ours by 91%.

31 Both MacPherson’s and Hawley’s work is published in a special demographics issue of the *Journal of Lutheran Mission* (JLM) Special Issue, 3 no. 3 (December 2016) archived online at www.lcms.org/journaloflutheranmission. In that issue see George Hawley, “A District-Level Examination of Demographic Trends and Membership Trends within LCMS Districts” [“District-Level Trends” herein], Special Issue: 2–6 and “The LCMS in the Face of Demographic and Social Change: A Social Science Perspective” [“LCMS—Demographic and Social Change” herein], Special Issue 7–84. In the same issue see also Ryan C. MacPherson, “Generational Generosity: Handing Down Our Faith to Our Children and Our Children’s Children” [“Generational Generosity” herein], *JLM* Special Issue, 85–121. Both authors provide not only important data, but also make specific practical suggestions regarding the implications of their data.

- 32 MacPherson, "Generational Generosity," 87–88.
- 33 MacPherson, "Generational Generosity," 87. Note, his analysis is based on total individuals, male and female, and therefore his percentages are, at best, about one-half of what the total fertility rate would be per female member.
- 34 See MacPherson, "Generational Generosity," 96–101.
- 35 MacPherson, "Generational Generosity," 89. MacPherson argues that since Baptists tend to baptize their young people at roughly the age that Lutherans confirm theirs, the comparison is appropriate.
- 36 MacPherson, "Generational Generosity," 94–95.
- 37 Hawley, "District-Level Trends," *JLM*: 2–6.
- 38 Hawley, "LCMS—Demographic and Social Change," *JLM*: 7–84.
- 39 George Hawley *Demography, Culture, and the Decline of America's Christian Denominations* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2017), abbreviated as *Demography, Culture, Decline*.
- 40 Devotion is measured by such factors as frequency of church attendance, personal Bible reading, and prayer.
- 41 Hawley, *Demography, Culture, Decline*, 110.
- 42 Hawley's correlations utilize a Pearson's R correlation coefficient. For further discussion see Vogel, *Behind the Numbers*, 204–205.
- 43 Hawley, *Demography, Culture, Decline*, 107, 110.
- 44 Hawley, *Demography, Culture, Decline*, 106.
- 45 The source is Bradley R.E. Wright, et al., "Religion, Race, and Discrimination: A Field Experiment of How American Churches Welcome Newcomers," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 54, no. 2 (2015): 185–204.
- 46 Amish Studies: The Young Center for Anabaptist and Pietist Studies, accessed October 16, 2024, available at <https://groups.etsown.edu/amishstudies/>.
- 47 Jana Riess, "Mormonism is still growing, but slowly" (April 12, 2024), available at <https://religionnews.com/webpkgcache.com/doc/-/s/religionnews.com/2024/04/12/mormonism-is-still-growing-but-slowly/>.
- 48 tedNews (Trans-European Division of Seventh-Day Adventists, 2024), available at <https://ted.adventist.org/news/adventists-are-fastest-growing-denomination-in-north-america/>.
- 49 Pew Research Center, "A Closer Look at Seventh-day Adventists in America," Michael Lipka (Washington, DC: Pew Research Center, November 3, 2015), <http://pewrsr.ch/1k7PJQX>.
- 50 See Ryan P. Burge, "Assemblies of God Growing with Pentecostal Perseverance," *Christianity Today* online (August 11, 2021), <https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2021/august/assemblies-of-god-grow-us-councildenomination-decline-poli.html>. See also John W. Kennedy, "Ethnic Minorities Continue to Strengthen," *Assemblies of God, News* (August 2, 2021), <https://news.ag.org/en/news/ethnic-minorities-continue-tostrengthen?D=2E2B8F9F882A474AAACE6260145ECF58B>.
- 51 Pew Research Center, "Half of U.S. Adults Raised Catholic Have Left the Church at Some Point," Caryle Murphy (Washington, DC: Pew Research Center, September 15, 2015), <http://pewrsr.ch/1iLISf>. See also Pew Research Center, "7 Facts About American Catholics," David Masci and Gregory A. Smith (Washington, DC: Pew Research Center, October 10, 2018), <https://pewrsr.ch/2Nucqgp>.
- 52 Lydia Saad, "Catholics' Church Attendance Resumes Downward Slide," Gallup (April 9, 2018), <https://news.gallup.com/poll/232226/church-attendance-among-catholics-resumes-downward-slide.aspx>. See also Megan Brenan, "US Catholics' Faith in Clergy is Shaken," Gallup News (January 11, 2019), <https://news.gallup.com/poll/245858/catholics-faith-clergy-shaken.aspx>.
- 53 Catholic News Agency reported that the Catholic Church had grown numerically on every continent in 2020, albeit with its most modest growth in Europe. The report was based on data from the Vatican's 2022 Pontifical Yearbook. See Claire Giangravé, National Catholic Reporter, "Vatican Census shows Catholicism Growing Everywhere but Europe," (Oct 22, 2021); available at <https://www.ncronline.org/news/vatican/vatican-census-shows-catholicism-growing-everywhere-europe>.
- 54 Pew, "7 Facts About American Catholics."

- 55 For an overview of PCA history and an analysis of its growth over the years, see Vogel, “Behind the Numbers,” 133–152.
- 56 A statement from North American Presbyterian and Reformed Council (NAPARC). See PCA Historical Center, “Studies & Actions of the General Assembly of The Presbyterian Church in America,” accessed May 6, 2022, <https://pcahistory.org/pca/studies/race.html>. See also Sean Michael Lucas, *For a Continuing Church: The Roots of the Presbyterian Church in America* (Philipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2015), 323 ff.
- 57 Dominic A. Aquila, et al., *A Statement of Identity for the Presbyterian Church in America* (1998), available in J. Oliver Buswell, Jr. Library at Covenant Theological Seminary Library.
- 58 To the Smyrneans, 8:2; regarding a “proper Eucharist,” Ignatius insists that either the bishop or his representative must administer it. “Let nothing be done without the bishop.” <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0109.htm>.
- 59 Cyril of Jerusalem, Catechetical Lecture 18.22–25. Quoted in Angelo Di Berardino, ed., *We Believe in One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2010), 75.
- 60 Jaroslav Pelikan, *Acts* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2005), 243.
- 61 On catholicity in Thomas Aquinas, see Vogel, “Behind the Numbers,” 294–299.
- 62 Martin Luther, “The Three Symbols or Creeds of the Christian Faith” (1538), in LW 34:229. Emphasis added, brackets original.
- 63 Gordon A. Jensen, “The Gospel: Luther’s Linchpin for Catholicity,” *Concordia Journal* 39, no. 4 (Fall 2013): 284.
- 64 Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2004), 1; also Lamin Sanneh, *Whose Religion Is Christianity? The Gospel beyond the West* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003) and Lamin Sanneh, *Disciples of All Nations: Pillars of World Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008). For a review of Sanneh impact, see Vogel, “Behind the Numbers,” 341–350.
- 65 Martin Luther, “On the Papacy in Rome against the Most Celebrated Romanist in Leipzig” (1520), LW 39:65. Emphasis added.
- 66 LC III 54, KW 447, emphasis added.
- 67 Robert Kolb, *Confessing the Faith: Reformers Define the Church, 1530–1580* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1991), 32.
- 68 Ap VII and VIII 9–10, K-W, 175, emphasis added.
- 69 C. F. W. Walther, *The Church & The Office of The Ministry*, J. T. Mueller, trans; revised, edited, annotated, Matthew C. Harrison (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2012), Church Thesis VI, 73. Walther’s emphasis on the “invisible church” arguably alludes to horizontal catholicity. In speaking of all who confess faith he refers to “the universal [catholic] Church” (Church Thesis VI, 72; note the addition of “catholic” in the Harrison edition). Walther also cites Calov on “what remains of the catholic in the Roman religion” in Church Thesis VII, 88.
- 70 Vogel, “Behind the Numbers,” 328. See the entire section on Loche in Vogel, 327–331.
- 71 Wilhelm Loche, *Three Books about the Church*, trans. James L. Schaaf. (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1969), 59.
- 72 Loche, *Three Books*, 59.
- 73 Loche, *Three Books*, 155.
- 74 On catholicity in LCMS catechetical tradition, see Vogel, “Behind the Numbers,” 313–325. On our dogmatic tradition, see pages 325–39.
- 75 Robert Kolb, *The Christian Faith: A Lutheran Exposition* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1993), 257–258.
- 76 Leopoldo A. Sánchez M., “Toward an Ecclesiology of Catholic Unity and Mission in the Borderlands: Reflections from a Lutheran Latino Theologian,” *Concordia Journal* 35, no. 1 (2009): 17–34; quote from page 27.

*Homiletical
Helps*

Tangible: Theology Learned and Lived

The Church's Response to Immigration

T*angible: Theology Learned and Lived* is a podcast from Concordia Seminary's department of Theological Research and Publications. Episodes are released on the fifteenth and thirtieth of each month. The podcast can be found on our website: concordiatheology.org and on all the major hosting apps. The following is a transcript of portions of the episode titled "The Church's Response to Immigration" by Dr. Leo Sánchez and Dr. Douglas Rutt released in August of 2024.

Jessica: Welcome to *Tangible: Theology Learned and Lived*. We're exploring the ways in which theology permeates all aspects of life. Through conversations with faculty here at Concordia Seminary St. Louis, we will challenge you to deepen your theology and live out your faith in Christ. I'm your producer and host, Jessica Bordeleau. I'll talk with a variety of professors on a variety of topics, something different every episode, but all pointing to the intersection of faith and daily life.

Today we're talking about migration and the church's response to immigrants. I have two experts in the studio today. They've both made this topic a focus in their ministry, but in different ways.

Dr. Leo Sánchez is Professor of Hispanic Ministries and Systematic Theology here at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis. He served as the main drafter for the LCMS Commission on Theology and Church Relations report, *Immigrants Among Us, a Lutheran framework for addressing immigration issues*. He was awarded a sabbatical grant from the Louisville Institute. He was the recipient of a grant from the Hispanic Theological

Initiative and is on the editorial board of the *Journal of Hispanic/Latino Theology*. Dr. Sánchez, welcome to the show.

Sánchez: Thank you. Pleasure to be here.

Jessica: Dr. Sánchez suggested that we invite Dr. Douglas Rutt to the conversation. Dr. Rutt is Professor Emeritus and served as provost here at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis. He was the executive director of International Ministries at Lutheran Hour Ministries. He has served in Central America for eight years. His published works include *Mission and the Age of Migration*, and he currently serves as the board chair of Christian Friends of New Americans, a St. Louis-based ministry. Dr. Rutt, welcome to the show.

Rutt: Thank you. It's good to be here.

Jessica: I'd like to start at the ground level. Dr. Sánchez, who are immigrants?

Sánchez: Okay, that's a good question because there are several categories of people who migrate. You have refugees and asylum seekers. Usually when you talk about neighbors in these categories, you're talking about people who had to leave their country because of proven fear of persecution due to religion, race, or political affiliation. And then you have what we might call "other migrants." Typically, we're talking about other types of factors like fear of gang violence, family unification, better socioeconomic conditions, political instability, or better educational opportunities, things like that.

There are also people who qualify for entering into the United States under humanitarian visas. And those are things like spousal abuse and human trafficking. By knowing the different types of migrants, it helps you to put on that human face. When you are listening to their stories, you may ask, how can we best help them?

Rutt: There are probably about 850,000 to 950,000 international students in the United States right now. Eighty percent of them never see the inside of an American's home while they're here.

Sánchez: Hospitality is a virtue of the church, a gift of the Spirit that we should always ask for. In some ways, even for Luther, kind of a mark of the

church. Usually when Lutherans think of “marks of the church,” they think the gospel and the sacraments because they deliver the gospel. Luther also speaks of hospitality as sort of a mark of the church in his lectures on Genesis. He’s talking about Abraham’s hospitality towards the three strangers. And Luther elevates, in some ways hospitality to a mark of the church. And he has this beautiful turn of phrase where he says, “the church is the house of Abraham in the world.”

Rutt: I think about the passage in Hebrews. It says, you may entertain angels unawares by extending hospitality. We don’t oftentimes even know what impact we’re going to have. I was in China and had the opportunity to talk to a congregation. Afterwards a young lady came up to me. She had gone to Bethany Lutheran College in Mankato to study journalism. That’s where she said she met “him.” And what she meant by that is Jesus. She said “it was like being snatched out of a burn unit” when she met Jesus Christ. And she said it wasn’t because the religion classes or having to go to chapel or anything like that. It was the hospitality. The way people received her and accepted her and extended hospitality to her is what really impressed her about the gospel.

Sánchez: So it was the church being “the house of Abraham in the world” in Mankato.

Rutt: Absolutely.

Sánchez: Abraham embodied God’s hospitality towards the strangers among us today.

Jessica: Remind us of that story. What did Abraham do?

Sánchez: Abraham is visited by three strangers or angelic figures. Abraham invites them and has a meal prepared for them. In the early church Abraham is seen as sort of the example of hospitality. I think of a number of theologians who go to Abraham to teach the church what it means to be hospitable. That’s always struck me as a wonderful catechesis or teaching from Luther, which happens at a time when you have a lot of displaced persons or refugees today.

Rutt: There are close to 300 million people on the move around the world for various reasons. We have a lot of controverted discussions today. Illegal immigration is an issue not only in the United States, it is a global issue,

but often migrants are painted with a broad brush. And some people are especially offended by the notion that we might have migrants who are illegal or undocumented or unauthorized. Sometimes pastors are shy about praying for migrant neighbors in their communities.

Sánchez: What happens with the categories of “illegal” and “legal” is that it places the migrant within the spectrum of a very restrictive category. The biblical category would be neighbor. Migrants are actually in that group that God commands us to love. They’re often placed with that group of people who are considered most vulnerable, like the widows and the orphans and the poor. God even commands Israel to love the aliens in their midst.

And so, the Old Testament doesn’t give you public policy on immigration, and it’s not intended to give you law on immigration, but it does give you a certain moral compass, like the way you look at these people as neighbors on God’s command. They are also people for whom Christ died. Those are the Christian’s ways of thinking about neighbors. So, we can disagree in terms of temporal matters of the state on policy. We all have our own ways in which we hope the world will run more thoroughly and justly and adequately. But we can still agree on the church’s mission, which is uniquely hers; to proclaim the gospel and to provide for the spiritual needs of all people, including migrants. It is possible to disagree on immigration issues and still have a united mission towards migrants.

This is where I find the Lutheran distinction between the two realms wonderful. There’s a temporal realm that deals with justice and how we relate to each other here. We’re going to have disagreements, politically. But there is also the spiritual realm through which God justifies sinners through faith in Christ, the proclamation of the gospel. That’s uniquely what the church does in the world. We are united in that mission no matter what. The beauty of Lutheran theology is that it helps you sort out some of this.

Rutt: It’s true. You’re called to pray for your enemies, love your neighbor, pray for those who persecute you. That’s something that we do as members of Christ’s kingdom. The government has the right and maybe responsibility to try to create processes and procedures and rules and laws that will preserve the integrity of a nation. They’re called to protect as well as to be just and fair.

Sánchez: God has given us all callings or vocations in life through which we're his instruments of provision and care in the world. From the perspective of vocation, all of a sudden, an issue that would've been so difficult to handle at the macro level became a lot easier to handle now. It has to do with actual neighbors whom I have been called to serve. That's the beauty of the Lutheran vocation. It helps you to land the plane so that you can say, well, who are the migrants who are in my community, in my church, in my workplace, in my college or university? And because I am somehow connected to these people, what are the responsibilities that follow from those vocations and callings? Yeah, the Lutherans have to say some things about this stuff.

I remember I was asked to preach in a town in Illinois, and they were wondering if there was a way they could reach out to a couple of Hispanic families. They were struggling with the best way to enter into a relationship with the family, they were like, "well, nobody here speaks Spanish, so how are we going to deal with that?" I said, think about the things that God has already given you. You have a school, right? They have children who need an education, right? Have a scholarship for migrants. Have a migrant fund for the family. There are actual tangible ways that you can be helping and entering into this wonderful relationship with migrants, using the resources that have already been given you as a congregation.

My own history coming to the United States was through the hospitality of a family of farmers from Williamsburg, Iowa. I lived with them for a couple of years in high school, and then they became mom and dad in the United States. And they have become a part of our lives ever since then. It was the hundredth anniversary of St. Paul's Lutheran Church in Williamsburg, Iowa. They asked me to preach, and they were so proud! They were so proud to have what I think at that time, was the first child of the congregation who become a pastor, a Lutheran pastor. Great stuff happens when we embody that vision, that catechesis from Luther to become the house of Abraham in the world. And that's what they were for me. They were my Abraham.

Hospitality is something that we have all been called to do as part of whatever vocations we have been given today. And given that we live in a world filled with migrant neighbors, we have a unique opportunity to extend the hand of hospitality to them in the name of Christ and walk

with them in their struggles and their hopes and see how we can best embody Yahweh's own concern and Jesus's own concern for the strangers among us. Even today.

Jessica: Dr. Sánchez, what do you want our listeners to remember?

Sánchez: Well, for me it would be, what does it mean to be the Lutheran church at a time when we have the largest number of displaced people in history? Reconnect to that part of our identity, which as Luther puts it so beautifully, is to be "the house of Abraham in the world." What does it mean to live that out today? So, I think in some ways, sort of reclaiming that aspect of the Lutheran tradition will be a wonderful witness to the gospel in our day and age.

Jessica: Dr. Rutt, what do you want our listeners to remember?

Rutt: The thing that occurs to me is that I would hope that people would see refugees and migrants and immigrants as individual people, that maybe have faced a number of different circumstances that have brought them here. See them as individual humans rather than categorizing them with a label.

Jessica: Well, that's all for today. I'd like to thank our guests Dr. Leo Sánchez and Dr. Douglas Rutt. Thanks for being on the show.

Sánchez: Thank you.

Rutt: My pleasure!

Jessica: And thank you for listening. You can find more episodes of *Tangible* on all the major hosting apps or on our website, concordiatheology.org. Check it out! We have a lot more free resources there. I'm your producer and host, Jessica Bordeleau. Join me next time when we talk about the intersection of theology and daily life, because it's tangible: theology learned and lived.

Reviews

DEMOCRACY AND SOLIDARITY:
On the Cultural Roots of America's
Political Crisis. By James Davison
Hunter. Yale University Press, 2024.
Hardcover. 504 pages. \$40.00.

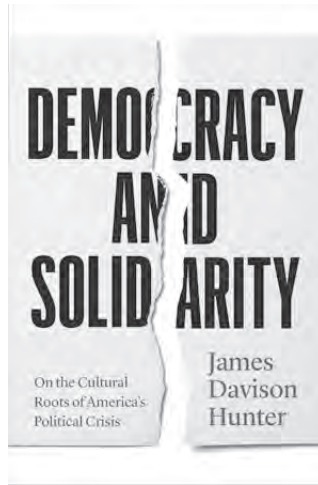
Sitting in the campus cafeteria reading this text, my attention was redirected when a couple of first-year students joined me at my table. Making a commendable effort at courteous conversation, one of them asked me if I was reading for leisure or out of obligation. It was a good question. It is rare that I indulge in reading for pure pleasure; there are simply too many things that I need to read to justify taking the time for what I would choose to read for the sheer joy of it. But, in the case of Hunter, as so often with his writing, I realized that I was reading for both reasons. Democracy and Solidarity is quite simply a very good book.

Hunter employs the full range of his significant tools: ably delving into the depths of American cultural history; exploring the ideological underpinnings of the Founders as those ideas became incarnate in lived historical realities; offering extensive citations for every argument and idea; writing with clarity, precision, and engaging storytelling; offering concise and accurate

representations of key thinkers in philosophy, sociology, politics, and even theology; and, through it all, delivering his message with a steady, deliberate, and nearly unimpeachable evenhandedness. Hunter demonstrates once again why he is an expert in the field of cultural sociology who deserves to be heard.

The scope of Hunter's project is remarkable. The extensive list of thinkers he invokes and lucidly explains runs the gamut from John Dewey to Adrian Vermeule, Woodrow Wilson to Charles Taylor, Jonathan Edwards to Friedrich Nietzsche, Reinhold Niebuhr to Richard Rorty, Walter Lippmann to Chantal Mouffe. His cast of essential thinkers and actors is smoothly woven into the book's structure, and the key themes or roles of each is deftly presented with no hint of pretension or condescension.

Hunter uses America's official motto, *e pluribus unum*, to explicate his premise: democracy is the task of finding a way to bring a plurality of ideas into a livable unity. The Founders began this arduous labor, but did not fully achieve it—indeed, in any true democracy, Hunter contends, this work will necessarily always be only in process. The solidarity that was gained through the hard work of sorting out various ideals, goals, and convictions (what Hunter



labels, *durcharbeiten*) defined and shaped America in its earliest decades, a uniquely American time and circumstance that Hunter labels, “America’s hybrid-Enlightenment.” His insightful point made with the term is that religious commitments mitigated the secularist excesses of pure Enlightenment thinking. In other words, America was conceived in the sweet spot of the Enlightenment when natural law and a creator were still part of the standard account.

The story of how the great American experiment moved from a time when solidarity was possible to the present situation in which “the cultural logic of the hybrid-Enlightenment that underwrote the liberal democratic regime has dissolved as a working logic of the public sphere” (367), is the driving task of the book. Hunter’s cumulative argument is conclusive and unsettling: “While many worry about fragmentation, polarization, and the potential for violence, among leading political actors, the idea of a common good sought through common hopes is nowhere invoked, much less pursued” (366). This is because, among other things, “There is now no authority by which questions of truth or reality or public ethics could be settled definitively” (367). Given these and so many other realities as detailed by Hunter, the prospects for a workable, much less vibrant democracy are bleak, indeed.

In the final pages of the book, Hunter offers a glance toward the future. Despite the overwhelming evidence, he insists that he is not at the point of despair. Yet, the foundation of his hope

for a way forward through and out of the fractured American culture is less than reassuring. I will not settle for his wan hope in a “reconstituted humanism . . . the premise of which would be the incontrovertible plurality of the later modern world and its irreducible particularity” (380). Nevertheless, I will embrace his final inarguable thoughts: “the most serious culture war we face at present is not against the ‘other side,’ but against the nihilism that insinuates itself in the symbolic, institutional, and practical patterns of the late modern world, not least its politics” (382). This is to say that America’s future is going to be shaped by forces far more significant than the outcomes of any election.

Any Christian concerned about the fate of America and her democracy will gain much from plunging into Hunter’s book. Christians need to take Hunter’s insights and assessments to heart as they determine their own ideas and actions regarding the nation in which they live. Indeed, going forward my new rejoinder to anyone offering commentary or evaluation about “what’s wrong” in America and her politics is going to be, “But have you read Hunter’s book?” Hunter’s analysis is spot on. Christians animated by a living hope in the coming kingdom of Christ will learn much from Hunter but then move from those hard and disquieting truths into a place of genuine hope—and perhaps also better discern a wise path forward for the faithful church in the undoubtedly turbulent times that lie ahead.

Joel Biermann

**THE MESSIANIC MESSAGE:
Predictions, Patterns, and Presence
of Jesus in the Old Testament.** By R.
Reed Lessing and Andrew E. Steinmann.
Concordia Publishing House, 2023.
Paper. 261 pages. \$19.99.

R. Reed Lessing and Andrew E. Steinmann, the dynamic duo of CPH Old Testament materials, have done it again. Adding to their plethora of commentaries and other resources, authored individually and together, they have now added a most valuable volume, helping their readers see Jesus, specifically as he is to be found in the Old Testament. They make their goal plain from beginning to end, from preface to closing chapter. “Seeing Jesus. That’s our greatest joy, and that’s why we wrote this book” (237).

Lessing and Steinmann write in an accessible, nontechnical style, inviting readers to keep reading. Some might argue that the book is rather basic, and in some ways, it is, but there’s something for all levels of readers. Pastors, church workers, and well-read lay folk will have heard much of this before. For that contingent, it is a great review and includes gems of insight that will benefit even the highly trained. For those with less biblical training or

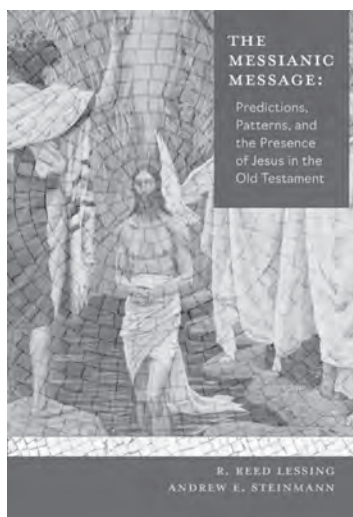
experience, this volume helps the reader to see Jesus in the pages of Scripture that are often considered unimportant or too challenging. The reader will see that it all holds together in Jesus.

The approach in this book is what I’ve decided to call maximally messianic. That is not meant to be derogatory— simply descriptive. If a passage can possibly be read in a messianic way, that’s how Lessing and Steinmann take it. Not everyone, not even all conservative

interpreters, will agree with every example given. Yet the approach is helpful, overall, and we will always be quibbling about details until the Messiah sets us straight upon his return.

Following the preface, the authors begin with a chapter that demonstrates “the messianic emphasis of the New Testament” (17).

Before moving into the Old Testament, they strive “to demonstrate that the authors from Matthew through the Book of Revelation read Israel’s sacred texts messianically” (18). First, they exhibit briefly that the New Testament books speak of the Messiah. Then they explore how the books do this asking, “What interpretive tools did these NT authors use to see the Messiah so clearly



in the OT?” (18). The rest of the chapter names and explains these three tools, already named in the subtitle of the book—Messianic Predictions, Patterns, and Presence. Chapters 2 through 4 are specifically arranged around these three tools, helping the reader to acquire a feel for the tools. From chapter 5 onward, the authors assume the reader is now “well equipped to classify each passage discussed into one of these three types of messianic revelation” (39).

Chapters 2 and 3 help the reader see Jesus in Genesis and the rest of the Pentateuch, respectively, exploring various messianic passages through the approach of Predictions, Patterns, and Presence. As the authors acknowledge, they have barely begun to scratch the surface of what could be explored in these foundational books of the Old Testament.

Chapter 4 deals with the various historical books while chapter 5 tackles the wisdom books. In each case, the books are of different varieties, but Lessing and Steinmann demonstrate that it is the Messiah and their witness to him that holds these books together.

The Book of Psalms is explored in chapter 6. A maximally messianic reading is given in that they read the book as a whole in a messianic/Davidic way, rather than just reading particular psalms as messianic. Not all agree about reading the book like this, but their approach is at least worth considering. Even if one decides not to follow their approach to the whole, their treatment of individual psalms can be of great benefit, especially

as those interpretations are driven by the extensive New Testament use of many psalms.

Chapter 7 covers Isaiah, a book replete with messianic content, returning to the tools of prediction and patterns. Chapter 8 explores Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel, while chapter 9 uses examples from seven of the twelve minor prophets to demonstrate “The major theme of the minor prophets: the promise of messianic grace” (207).

Chapter 10 gives an overall summary of what has been covered throughout. There is a wonderfully written section on “Seeing the hope of Israel fulfilled in Jesus” (236). The chapter ends with three helpful principles for reading the Old Testament messianically.

Following chapter 10 is a section that gives possibilities for further reading in general and for each chapter of the book. After that comes a non-exhaustive, yet extensive list of “the most important messianic prophecies in the Old Testament” (258).

The Messianic Message can easily be used by an individual for personal study or even devotionally. It could also be used in a group book study or by a group leader as a reference for guiding others through a study of messianic passages of the Old Testament, helping them to see Jesus.

This book is about seeing Jesus. In the preface Lessing and Steinmann write, “Our primary reason for writing this book is to help you see Jesus in the Old Testament so that your relationship with Him deepens and your knowledge

of God's Word increases. Then you will see what the New Testament sees—that Israel's Scriptures not only speak of the Messiah but also identify Jesus as the Christ" (15). If one reads this book carefully and then reads the Old Testament in the way Lessing and Steinmann promote, one cannot help but see Jesus more clearly. I will be rereading this book for my own benefit and will exhort others—family members, friends, pastors, and seminary students—to read and make use of it, too.

Philip Werth Penhallegon

UNFORGIVEABLE? How God's Forgiveness Transforms Lives. By Ted Kober and Mark Rockenbach. Concordia Publishing House, 2023. Paperback. 264 Pages. \$17.99.

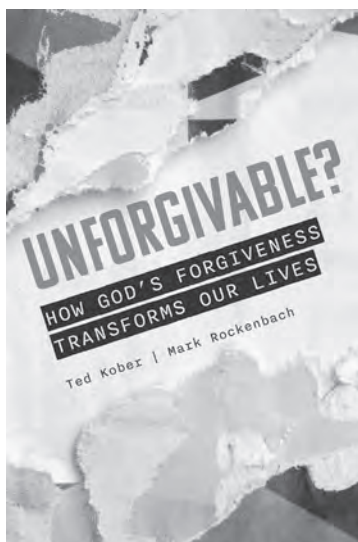
When there is deep hurt, abuse, injustice, and unrepentance, it may seem there is no way to forgive such evil. By turning to what God's word says about forgiveness, Ted Kober and Mark Rockenbach help the person struggling with unforgiveness to find genuine peace even when deeply hurt by others. That is the goal of *Unforgivable? How God's Forgiveness Transforms Lives*.

To do this, Rockenbach and Kober point to forgiveness, not as coming from us, but as a miraculous divine gift. They write, "Forgiveness is something that takes place outside of us and is given to us as a gift from God" (8). This is what Christians give when forgiving those who sin against them, even those who

seem unforgiveable. Through practical approaches provided in the book, the writers maintain this focus on the truth and power of God's forgiveness in Christ as key to overcoming unforgiveness. The powerful stories they share show how this happens in real life.

The book is organized using chapter titles that pose key questions for addressing unforgiveness. In the first few chapters, the questions are foundational for defining the nature of unforgiveness, for describing those needing to forgive, and for discussing the place of prayer in this process. In the chapters that follow, the authors ask challenging questions that often arise in struggles with unforgiveness, like, What if they don't repent? Does forgiveness release from consequences? What if I can't forgive myself? What if others won't forgive me? Is there any unforgivable sin?

Each chapter begins with newly



crafted hymns by lyricist Kenneth Kosche that introduce the question with its struggles and solution. Kober and Rockenbach then address that question with clear answers from God's word and tested research, drawing on their own extensive experience with people struggling to forgive. They weave in familiar biblical narratives like the stories of Joseph and Jonah and others, using sound exegesis to apply God's word to contemporary challenges of unforgiveness. Powerful personal accounts from their lives along with stories of incredible feats of forgiveness they have witnessed by others also inspire readers to respond. Practical guidance for the use of prayer is a prominent feature at the close of each chapter, as are reflection and application questions. They close out the book with practical steps for proclaiming forgiveness, the goal of the book.

As a counselor and a pastor, we suggest a few ways the book can help people find peace with God, self, and others through forgiving those who seem unforgivable.

Counselors will benefit from this resource in many ways, but an important one is helping adults who have lived through childhood trauma. We know that these types of memories relived can be re-traumatizing and may lead to what the authors refer to as "being caught in the loop of unforgiveness." They point out that this loop can lead to a focus on the hurt inflicted by "fanning the flames of anger and malice" (89). Showing that the suffering brought by the trauma

comes amidst the fallen world gives context for focusing on healing through the forgiveness of Christ. Shifting the focus to the narrative of God's love and his protection through the forgiveness he provides, can help the adult trauma survivor to forgive. Even when justice and reconciliation have not happened and may not occur, this miraculous act of sharing God's forgiveness in Christ can still bring peace.

Counselors will also benefit from the many specific Scripture references used in this book that can provide practical applications with clients. The authors who are experts in the use of Scripture provide direct quotes for specific contexts and stories that can naturally be utilized by Christian mental health professionals. Pastors who collaborate with Christian counselors should consider offering this book as a resource for those to whom they refer their members. Their counterparts in the field of counseling will find it enriching for their practice.

Pastors will also find this book a valuable resource to inform them in supporting their members who face the struggle of unforgiveness. It can be used practically by asking a member to read and then discuss a particular chapter that addresses their specific area of need. For example, a member may be questioning how to forgive in a case of abuse where there still needs to be consequences delivered by the courts that protect the vulnerable. The authors clearly and sensitively answer this type of question.

Perhaps two of the most helpful insights that flow through the entire

book are how law and gospel impact the one needing to forgive. It is through these core teachings of Scripture that pastors can help the unforgiving person have peace with God, self, and others.

In the realm of the law the writers pull back the curtain on the painful consequences for the person refusing to forgive. Unforgiveness is yielding to the temptation of the devil who only adds to the pain and toxicity of the sin. “Unforgiveness is poison we ingest, hoping the other person dies” (26). As pastors help people see this, they can then follow Kober and Rockenbach’s continual prescription to point to the miracle of God’s forgiveness of sinners in Christ’s death and resurrection. This book taps into this message of law and gospel to enable people to miraculously forgive with no strings attached those

who have deeply hurt them. It comes from their identity in Christ: “If I focus on my identity as a child of God, my fear, love, and trust in Jesus will be revealed in the way I treat others. Just as Jesus did, I will treat others with love, kindness, and forgiveness, even if they have wronged me” (38).

This book is a wonderful resource to help those who struggle with unforgiveness to have peace in Christ instead.

W. Mart Thompson
Cheryl M. Thompson, LPC

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