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Church at Its Best

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The topic came up in casual conversation. I was with a group of bishops, and we were talking about family life and our friends who have no connection to the church. One of the bishops spoke about his grown son. "There is a group of guys that gets together in a coffee shop on Saturday mornings. My son says they really care about each other and go deeper than just talking about sports teams and work. That group is my son's church."

I knew this bishop was speaking honestly about his son's experience. After all, few of us need to look beyond our own extended family to understand that the question "Why church?" is a point of inquiry for many. That day, I also knew that I wanted to write about what the church is and is not; especially, I wanted to write about experiences that are like an aspect of being the church but aren't actually church in a biblical or theological sense.

Many facets of contemporary life are attractive, whether one goes to church or not. The coffee is undoubtedly better as a pour-over brew on Saturday than it is in its watered-down form in most congregations the next day. Conversation may be livelier and the genuine concern for one another deeper among self-selected friends than they are among the remnant that gathers in the fellowship hall. The experience of belonging to a community of faith and how that experience spills over into daily life has changed so much in recent decades that a growing number

When it is at its best, church is defined by a community of believers gathered by the Holy Spirit around Word and Sacrament. Luther further elucidates seven marks of the true church, expanding on this understanding of Christian community. The church gathers to praise its Lord and care for the community, both in that place and outside its doors.

of people do ask, "Why church?"—that is, if they bother to think about institutionalized religion at all.

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In the Reformation era, Martin Luther responded according to the way the question was formulated in his day. Amid profound changes in the culture, as well as in ecclesiastical structures, in 1539, Luther wrote the treatise "On the Councils and the Church."[1]

He addressed the question of where the church can be found by referencing a "holy Christian people" and crediting the persistence of the church as a gift from God, despite abuses by religious leaders and indifference by many. Luther asserts, "There must always be such people on earth, even though it may be only two or three, or only children."[2]

Church-making is the work of the Spirit, as all who have studied *Luther's Small Catechism* recall from his explanation of the Third Article of the Apostles' Creed.[3] In other parts of the Christian tradition, the source and sustaining life of the church may be posed differently, but the existence of a visible church goes without saying in all branches of Christianity. Yet, to answer the contemporary question "Why church?" by saying "Because God thinks a community gathered in Christ's name is a good idea" ends an important conversation before it begins.

A more generous conversation today requires that we ask questions like these: Why does the church matter both to those inside its walls and to those outside? What is it that one can expect from participating in a local community of faith?

Though God has no need to be convinced by an argument of relevance, many in our day carry the expectation that investments of time and commitment will bear fruit in some recognizable way in one's life. Those start-of-the-year workout sessions at the gym are meant to lower blood pressure and help one lose weight. If

[1] Martin Luther, "On the Councils and the Church (1539)," *Luther's Works* 41, ed. Helmut T. Lehmann (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1966) 4–178. Hereafter referred to as *LW*.

[2] *LW* 41:147.

[3] Martin Luther, "The Small Catechism," *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000) 355–56.

there are no signs of quick improvement, motivation evaporates, and soon participation shifts to an occasional visit and then a lapsed membership.

Alongside that, we live in an era driven by the priorities of personal experience and choice. We tailor the music we listen to and the shows we stream to those that appeal to our own taste. Our food preferences are determined by health concerns, worries about the future of the planet, and trendy ideas about what constitutes a healthy diet. The sharing of food treats in the workplace changes when there is no longer a common recipe that appeals to all coworkers. No more donuts on Tuesday or brownies at the staff meeting.

Both the desire to see a material benefit and the assumption that cultural tastes need to be honored impact how discussions of church life unfold today. Is the worship time convenient amid other weekend obligations and plans? Does the music appeal to my taste? Will my children or teens find friends and not complain too much about having to go?

The church's role as a sacred, privileged institution at the heart of family and community life has also been up-ended by an increase in competing loyalties. Sports, part-time jobs, and opportunities for leisure travel impact congregational life even for clergy families. That loss of privilege is not all bad, though it does raise concerns within congregational and institutional church structures.

This is not the first time in American history in which only a minority of people are in worship weekly.[4] However, striking changes in worship attendance and affiliation habits are obvious to those who lead church life and to those responding to popular surveys.[5] It's not surprising that the relevance of the institutional church would arise as a theme for this journal.

It's tempting to build the case for why the church still matters by answering each of those critiques directly or by trying to compete in the cultural marketplace of options and activities. In fact, this seems to be a common response at the congregational level. Book discussions, walking groups, and exercise classes appear on the weekly schedule. A meal and a brief worship service on Wednesday evening are promoted as an alternative to Sunday attendance for busy families. Gatherings in bars to sing hymns and socialize have grown in popularity. New music styles are introduced along with screens to project words and images to enhance the worship experience in the digital age.

All those may be good and appropriate innovations, especially when they arise from paying attention to those beyond the congregation, who are then invited to "come and see" how fresh the life of the church can be in the twenty-first

[4] Martin Marty has been helpful in clarifying what is a new trend in church attendance and what is a shift in the trend that peaked in the 1960s in articles like "Church Attendance Wasn't Always Robust in Past" (*Ethics Daily,* November 7, 2012): https://tinyurl.com/uoyj6uw. He cites colonial-era attendance to be fewer than 20 percent, with a rise to 34 percent between 1776 and 1850.

[5] Pew Research Center's recent report "In U.S., Decline of Christianity Continues at Rapid Pace" (October 2019) highlights not only fewer Christians at worship each week but segments that by generations. The full study can be found at https://tinyurl.com/y54m8cjv.

century. But new programs and the use of technology don't really answer the question of *why* the church matters in the first place.

To get at that deeper question, I return to Luther's writing from 1539 and the identifying marks he named in his day. The challenges confronting the church in Minnesota, where I live, today are not really different than the challenges in sixteenth-century Saxony.

When Luther outlined the doctrine of the church, he was concerned to give the gospel of God's activity through Jesus Christ free play in the reforms of the day. He asserted that church is not a building but a holy people, called together by the Spirit. Church is not defined by uniform rites and rituals, church governance, or even a hierarchy of power. All those come to the forefront in debates during and after Luther's life, but they remain secondary concerns.

Luther names seven marks, or principle parts, by which the true church can be identified.[6] They are:

- The word of God
- The Sacrament of Baptism
- The Sacrament of Holy Communion
- The practice of forgiveness
- The office of public ministry
- Prayer, public praise, and thanksgiving
- Suffering

Could it be that the church matters most when it attends to what is most central to being church?

I serve as a synodical bishop in the Upper Midwest, where church life continues with a vitality more like in previous decades than is true in some parts of the country. Yet, I do not know of a single congregation that has not given serious thought to its future, the changing patterns of worship attendance and financial stewardship, and the question of who will be a part of the congregation in the next generation. Here, as elsewhere, groans of anxiety and uncertainty can be heard about the well-being of the church.

And yet, the church persists. When people gather on Sunday morning (or evening or Saturday or Thursday, as worship patterns evolve), it may be in a hundred-year-old building with a leaky roof, a newly renovated building with a large mortgage, a rented storefront, or a borrowed auditorium. Whatever the architecture, the furniture, the musical accompaniment, the preaching style, or the generations represented, a "holy Christian people" gathers for worship and is sent out for living in a very complex world.

What follows is a description of church at its best. There may be a few congregations that embody this description boldly and perfectly, but I have drawn these

[6] *LW* 41:148–166; Gordon W. Lathrop and Timothy J. Wengert use these same marks to address a different question in *Christian Assembly: Marks of the Church in a Pluralistic Age* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004). My concern is not where the church is to be found but why the church matters as it is found.

glimpses from what I have seen in a variety of congregations, large and small. In each, the desire is to be faithful to the experience of being called together by the Holy Spirit and sent out into God's world.

Living by a Fresh Word

Mention the word of God, preaching, or a preacher, and a particular image of the clergy comes to mind. The image may vary by one's exposure to a particular denomination or a popularized stereotype, but not everyone thinks of the word of God as something in which ordinary Christians participate. And yet, the church is a community built up by the common study and hearing of God's word. That means no generation simply makes up what it believes or creates an ethic for itself without an outside authority.

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Visiting a congregation on a recent Sunday morning, I encountered a young girl, perhaps five or six years old. She was holding a Bible of stories chosen for children her age. "Do you like your Bible?" I asked. "Very much," she answered, holding the book to her heart. She sensed the holy treasure that had been handed on to her.

At the heart of church life is the presence of Jesus Christ, the incarnate Word of God. Luther understood the primacy of God's living presence in forming the community called church. A sacred text, shared and studied by more than two billion Christians around the globe, lends itself to great debates and disagreements, but it also provides a common foundation that transcends every demographic difference.

No other best-seller or blockbuster, no sports team, no political party by which we describe our loyalties plays the same role that the word of God plays in making a holy Christian people or church. Not every congregation offers opportunities to study and discuss Scripture in depth—and certainly preaching is not excellent everywhere—but where those happen there is a vitality that gives hope and opens up genuine dialogue on issues as divisive as immigration, economic reform, and personal morality.

When church is at its best, the people of a congregation are tethered to a living word. From that perspective they grapple with all the demands of contemporary life. From a rich, centuries-old biblical perspective they remember the mandate to love one's neighbors as they debate local issues like zoning laws and school funding. In the church not every discussion ends with everyone on the same side of an

issue, but in the church the word of God is a part of every decision. Because the word of God is living, it is a fresh yet ancient word.

Living with a God-Given Identity

Baptism and Holy Communion are called sacraments in the Lutheran church. Some Christian denominations have more than two sacraments, and some communities of faith downplay the sacraments altogether. Yet, to participate in sacramental life is both deeply personal and surprisingly public. Baptism is a call into life in Christ. Holy Communion fuels that life.

There are hundreds of ways to define one's identity today and many opportunities to join an affinity group that shares that identity. The opening story of the men who gather in the coffee shop on Saturdays is an example. Common friendships and the price of a beverage are the entrance criteria. Show up and you're a part of the group.

There are less public and more anonymous examples of groups that thrive on social media. Many of these inspire and encourage like-minded folks—marathon runners, Black Lives Matter activists, mothers of young children, cancer survivors, or spouses of deployed troops. We know that other groups are more nefarious in their intent, attracting others with a shared hatred or violent agenda. Affinity groups allow one to self-select an identity and a community to which to belong.

The church, marked by sacraments, understands itself to be called together by the Spirit. The offer of admission is as wide as God's grace. And while the examples of exclusion from font and table are legion, when the church gets this right there is no more-powerful witness to the beauty of a community woven together across every race and gender and nationality than the community called together by holy invitation.

In baptism we do not choose our siblings. Like Christians before us, we are given an identity as a child of God that is more fundamental than all the labels that will be attached to us over a lifetime. No one is too young or old, too broken or weary to be welcomed into the church. It is the only intergenerational, multiracial, cross-cultural, and transnational institution that exists today.

In the synod where I serve, robust partnerships exist between congregations here and parishes in Guatemala and Tanzania. With a spirit of accompaniment, weekly prayers for one another are offered, visits are exchanged, and projects are undertaken to build up the church in both locations. A wide variety of international programs beyond Christian congregations foster mutual understanding and grassroots help, but in the church such mutuality flourishes as a natural extension of unity in Christ and an understanding of baptism that does not depend on geographic borders.

At its best, the church keeps that common baptismal identity in sharp focus so that the barriers of social class, education, race, sexual orientation, and gender don't separate and segregate as they do in other public gatherings. I do not know

a congregation without work still to do in this regard, but at its best, the church is motivated to address these subtle and not-so-subtle divisions because of the unity already given in baptism.

Gathering at a Larger Table

I am amazed by all the ways Holy Communion is served in the congregations I visit. People stream forward to be fed at the head of a line or quietly, eighteen people kneel before a communion rail in a 150-year-old sanctuary. When I am asked to help distribute the sacrament, sometimes I wonder if there will be bread and wine enough. Yet, always there is.

Like baptism, much can be said about the role of communion in the lives of Christians, but at the top of the list is the recognition that it is God who acts. Just as God provides food for the whole creation, it is God who makes this meal holy. Those who share Holy Communion together learn to share bread with others all through the week without concern that there won't be enough to go around.

During the past few years, as public rancor has increased, I have wondered where on earth we will find the courage and the sensibility to talk again with one another about tough issues. At its best, the church understands that the table God sets is as wide as God's mercy and love. That deep learning takes on life outside worship at open-door community meals, at local food programs, and up and down the rows of a community garden where families from very different backgrounds weed and water together on a summer evening.

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Living by God's Forgiveness

Asked what one thing sets the Christian church apart from every other group, I always say the practice of forgiveness. When a gunman entered a one-room Amish schoolhouse in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, on October 2, 2006, shooting eight young girls and killing five of them, the world shook with the depravity of that violence. In the days that followed, the world trembled a second time as members of the Amish community, whose daughters and neighbors had been killed, expressed forgiveness to the shooter and rallied to support his own widow and children.[7] How is it possible, I wondered, to set the practice of forgiveness so

[7] Donald B. Kraybill, Steven M. Nolt, and David L. Weaver-Zercher, *Amish Grace: How Forgiveness Transcended Tragedy* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2007). Kraybill et al. go much deeper than do other

deeply in the heart of a faith community that even the worst cruelty does not quell the power to forgive?

In subsequent years, other public expressions of undeserved forgiveness have given me pause, especially when such actions have extended across the barriers of racism and bigotry.

In June 2015, family members of the nine persons killed by a hate-filled gunman at Mother Emanuel AME Church in Charleston, South Carolina, stepped forward just two days later to speak directly to the gunman at his bond hearing. Several rose to say, "I forgive you" to the young man, who had changed their life forever.[8]

Forgiveness can never devolve into a way for an offender to say a casual "I'm sorry." The forgiveness, witnessed in Lancaster County and Charleston is deeply rooted in the practice of remembering God's mercy. It is an expression of Christian identity that forms a whole way of life. Such powerful, unexpected public expressions of forgiveness testify before a cynical world that God can do within us what our human emotions, history, or experience could never muster apart from God.

At its best, the church teaches us to lean on God's forgiveness and mercy and to offer the same to others. In a culture that isolates and holds grudges, the church is the place where we learn to practice that gracious, transformative art whether the stakes are small or large.

Living with Those Who Shepherd Us

Not every community of faith has a paid, theologically schooled leader, pastor, or deacon. In the Lutheran tradition, we mostly do.

Because such a pastoral leader is central to the well-being of the community of faith, what could be more devastating and detrimental than clergy who abuse or neglect those in their care? All across the country, from one denomination to another, we have witnessed the public indictment and conviction of those who have betrayed the trust that was placed in them.

One of my roles as a bishop is to work with congregations and individuals who have suffered such betrayal. The impact can linger for generations unless hard work is done to reestablish the trustworthiness of those in the pastoral office.

If such instances of clergy misconduct and abuse describe what can go wrong, what describes the difference when things go right? Does it matter to have a pastor who engages the congregation with faithfulness, respect, and courage?

social media accounts in their assessment of forgiveness as a profound mark of Christian community among the Amish.

[8] Mark Berman, "'I Forgive You.' Relatives of Charleston church shooting Victims Address Dylann Roof," *The Washington Post*, June 19, 2015, https://tinyurl.com/r4kxl5y. This surprising offer of forgiveness is highlighted in the 2019 documentary film *Emanuel*. Following a guilty verdict for Amber Guyger, a former Dallas police officer, in the murder of Botham Jean, an unarmed neighbor, the victim's brother, Brandt Jean, spoke forgiveness to her and hugged her in the Dallas courtroom. "Amber Guyger Is Sentenced to 10 Years for Murder of Botham Jean," *The New York Times*, October 2, 2019, https://tinyurl.com/y5ap6bft.

Pastors matter, as do deacons.[9] Congregations remind me of this whenever a beloved pastor takes a new call or retires. I am regularly cautioned to "help us find someone good" because the office of ministry matters to the whole congregation. (While the sixteenth-century Luther would have been surprised to hear that the office of pastor—and bishop—could be faithfully filled by a woman, many Lutherans globally have come to affirm this as a sound practice.)

What is it that a pastor adds to the well-being of the church? When a new pastor is ordained, a prayer is offered calling for the person to be given the gifts needed for the ministry of Word and Sacrament. "Bless her proclamation of your word and administration of your sacraments, so that your church may be gathered for praise and strengthened for service. Make her a faithful pastor, patient teacher, and wise counselor."[10]

In my work as a bishop, there are a few personal characteristics I look for in a pastor. These include respect for people in their unique and diverse identities, curiosity about God's word and about the world around us, discipline in stewarding time and money, an ability to laugh at oneself and to ask for help, and a lifelong openness to new learning. Pastors from many backgrounds fit that profile, and these seem to be the persons who thrive in ministry, not just in the easy seasons but also when tensions are high.

At its best, the church is served by such a wise and faithful pastor. That is a boon not only for the congregation but for the surrounding community. A local principal turns to the neighborhood pastor after a high schooler dies by suicide. They confer not only about grief but about mental health resources for the community. A pastor is tapped to serve on the board of a community center, and soon the church offers space for an after-school kids program that had outgrown its old home. Lutherans don't call their neighborhoods their "parish," but many savvy pastors are learning to be as present in the streets and shops as inside a locked-up fortress.

Living by Prayer and Worship

Week by week, I travel among 112 congregations and mission starts in this synod, and each is a living, breathing community. No two are identical in their worship life. What each embodies is a way of praising God with songs and words and rituals that have taken on rich meaning in that local context.

As an invited guest, I never quite view worship with an outsider's eye. Yet, I am not an insider to all the nuances and history that have built up the form of worship in a particular place. I marvel at the variety of music genres, styles of

[9] The decision of the ELCA Churchwide Assembly in 2016 to create a single roster for deacons has led to a new prominence for the ministry of Word and Service in this church body. I am grateful for the twenty-one deacons currently serving in active ministry in the Saint Paul Area Synod. Though I address only pastors here, similar appreciation could be added for the ministry of deacons.

[10] *Evangelical Lutheran Worship: Occasional Services for the Assembly* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2009), 191.

preaching, prayers formally prepared or spontaneously offered, and even the elements that are used for Holy Communion. Hand-crafted loaves and store-bought bread, old-fashioned wafers and gluten-free options all speak to what is meaningful, purposeful, and attentive in that local context.

And worship it is. Praise of God, not of self. Generous time for prayers, spoken and unspoken. Thanksgiving and gratitude from beginning to end. It's tempting to critique a worship service as one might a theater production, but that doesn't quite catch what a whole community does when it gathers together before a living God.

At its best, Sunday worship is never divorced from the rest of the week, but the two are tied together. The church connects worshippers' lives with their vocations in a way that gives joy and purpose. As one congregation notes on its exit sign from the parking lot, "You are now entering the mission field."[11]

Living with Suffering

In naming the marks of the church, Luther made the bold move to include suffering alongside the other formal activities that distinguish the church from other institutions. This may be the most surprising aspect for a skeptical audience today.

In naming the marks of the church, Luther made the bold move to include suffering alongside the other formal activities that distinguish the church from other institutions.

"The holy Christian people are externally recognized by the holy possession of the sacred cross," Luther wrote. "They must endure every misfortune and persecution, all kinds of trials and evil from the devil, the world and the flesh (as the Lord's Prayer indicates) by inward sadness, timidity, fear, outward poverty, contempt, illness and weakness, in order to become like their head, Christ."[12]

Some might see that as a marketing disaster in a consumer-oriented culture, but I think the authenticity of the church, as a community that embraces suffering—not for suffering's own sake but out of love for others—as compelling as any cheery escapism offered by other allegiances.

At its best, the church cares not only for the hardships and needs of its own members but for the suffering of others. One congregation works to resettle a family of refugees, with forty volunteers helping these new neighbors through their first months in a new home. In a city, a violent death leads to an offer to host the funeral for the grieving family, which leads to a relationship beyond a one-time building use. In another congregation, a member's grandchild, sick with leukemia,

[11] Saint Mark's Lutheran Church, North Saint Paul, Minnesota.
[12] *LW* 41:164.

becomes the rallying point for several generations. Spaghetti suppers are hosted to raise money, drivers shuttle parents to regional medical facilities, prayers are voiced around countless supper tables. The heart of a whole community rises and falls as medical updates are offered, but there is never a thought that what is being asked is too much to give.

When he was a teenager, one of my godchildren, a pastor's kid himself, said that he would join any church that said to him, "Come and die," quoting Dietrich Bonhoeffer.[13] Today he belongs to a congregation that takes seriously the mandate to care for one's neighbors even when it is not easy or convenient. I don't think he is the only millennial to find riskier, costlier engagement a compelling reason to be committed to the church.

Church at Its Best

"Why church?" is a great question to ask in every generation. God has a way of shaping an answer that is unique to the time and context in which the question is posed. In our contemporary American context, the institutional church matters most when it aligns with what is most central to its being. At its best, the church gathers people to hear and study the word of God, to be given an identity in baptism and experience a table with room for all in communion, to practice forgiveness in season and out so that it becomes a way of life, to be led by pastors worthy of the title "shepherd," to center worship in prayer and praise of God, and to embrace the suffering that comes to oneself for the sake of the gospel and to embrace with love others who suffer in the world.

When those features are present as concrete expressions of the church in a local context, there is no reason to wonder about irrelevancy or to worry unduly about the future. It may even be that in such a place, someone will meet the men in the Saturday coffee shop and be curious enough about their lives to really get to know them—and then to invite them to discover what it means to be church at its best today.

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[13] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, vol. 4: Discipleship* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 87.