

Issues, Etc.

JOURNAL



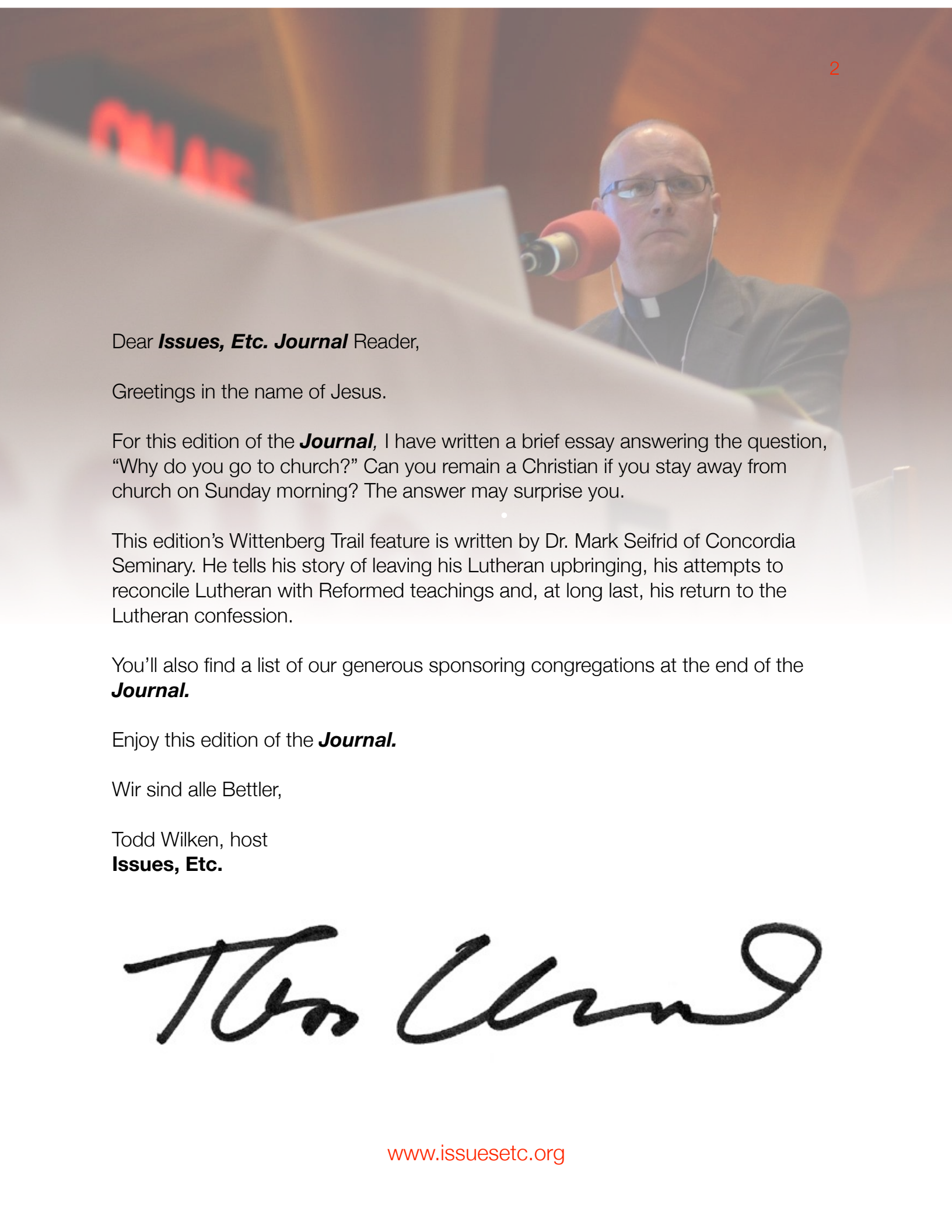
Why Do You Go to Church?

by Todd Wilken

Wittenberg Trail:
My Long Journey Home

by Mark Seifrid

Summer—2018

A man with glasses and a clerical collar is speaking into a red microphone. He is looking slightly to the side. The background is blurred, showing some red and orange lights.

Dear **Issues, Etc. Journal** Reader,

Greetings in the name of Jesus.

For this edition of the **Journal**, I have written a brief essay answering the question, “Why do you go to church?” Can you remain a Christian if you stay away from church on Sunday morning? The answer may surprise you.

This edition’s Wittenberg Trail feature is written by Dr. Mark Seifrid of Concordia Seminary. He tells his story of leaving his Lutheran upbringing, his attempts to reconcile Lutheran with Reformed teachings and, at long last, his return to the Lutheran confession.

You’ll also find a list of our generous sponsoring congregations at the end of the **Journal**.

Enjoy this edition of the **Journal**.

Wir sind alle Bettler,

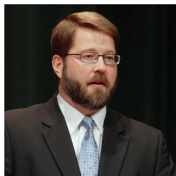
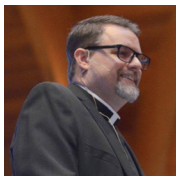
Todd Wilken, host
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A large, stylized handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Todd Wilken".

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Why Do You Go to Church?

by Todd Wilken

I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him; but the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith...

For many Lutherans these are some of the most beloved words from *Luther's Small Catechism's* explanation to the Third Article of the Apostles' Creed.

These words teach that saving faith in Jesus is not the result of my reason or effort, but the work of the Holy Spirit alone. These words are a corollary of the Reformation's central insight that sinners are declared righteous before God for Christ's sake alone, by Grace alone, through Faith alone. These words teach that even saving faith itself is a divine gift.

For many Lutherans, if they remember and can recite anything from *Luther's Small Catechism*, it is these words.

Less remembered, if not often forgotten, is the rest of Luther's explanation of the Third Article:

...in the same way as He calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian Church on earth, and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one true faith. In this Christian Church He daily and richly forgives all my sins and the sins of all believers. On the last day He will raise me and all the dead, and give eternal life to me and all believers in Christ. This is most certainly true.

Here Luther teaches that the Holy Spirit hasn't given the gift of faith to me alone, but to the whole Church. Here we learn that the Holy Spirit alone keeps me and all believers in that faith in this Church alone.

The fact that the first part of Luther's explanation is so well remembered, and the second part is so easily forgotten may help us diagnose a perennial problem and provide a solution to that problem as well.

Years ago we used to do a lot of "open lines" segments on **Issues, Etc.** I would "lay the table" by introducing the topic, ask questions related to it, and hope for phone calls. We produced three hours of live, drive-time radio every weekday. Frankly, we had a lot of airtime to fill, and open lines helped do that. I have long forgotten most of those segments, but I do remember one in particular. We did an hour of open lines, asking our listeners to answer the question, "Why do you go to church?"

As the host, I was supposed to have an answer to that question too. We would take the listeners' answers, then at the end of the hour, I would wrap things up with my answer. I remember that as I began that hour, I didn't have an answer.

I was a life-long Lutheran, from an every-Sunday church-going family, Seminary educated, and a parish pastor for over ten years, but I didn't have an answer to the question, "Why do you go to church?"

Why did I go to church on Sunday? Apart from the fact that it had been my job as a pastor, why did I go? Why did I get myself, my wife and children into the car every weekend to attend the Divine Service?

Revivalist preacher Billy Sunday is supposed to have said, "Going to church doesn't make you a Christian any more than going to a garage makes you an automobile." This is certainly the conventional wisdom in American Christianity

today. And no wonder, by and large, American Christianity doesn't confess the first half of Luther's explanation to the Third Article, much less the second half.

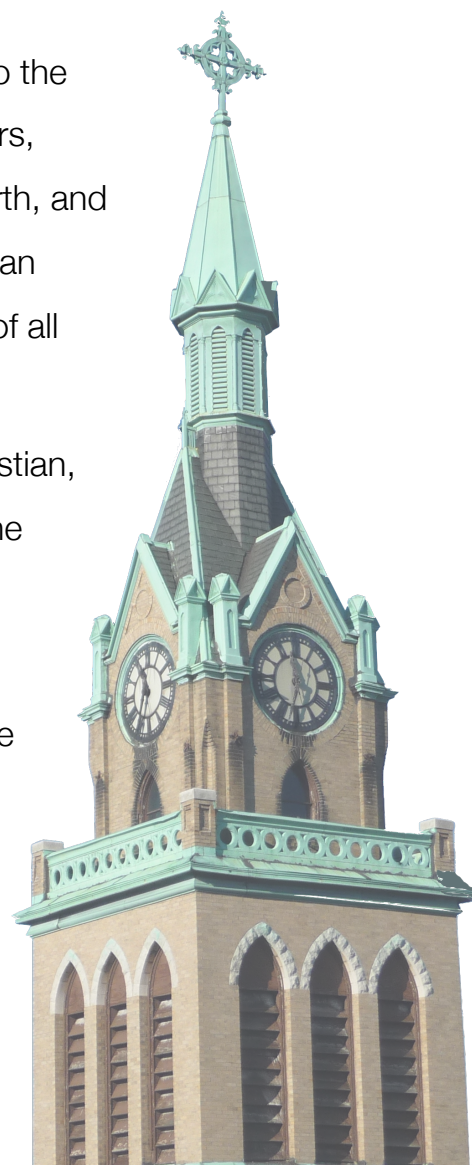
For many Christians, saving faith isn't a gift given by the Holy Spirit, it is an act of your will and a decision of your mind. So maintaining that saving faith is likewise your action and decision. The Sunday morning service is just a convenient gathering place for like-minded Christians. Attending Sunday services is like eating at Chic-fil-A, or shopping at Hobby Lobby. It's just something Christians do to support a Christian organization. It's encouraged, but not required, and certainly not necessary.

Ask the average church-goer, "If you stopped going to church, would you eventually stop being a Christian?" and the answer will be a firm "no." But is that true?

What does the second half of Luther's explanation to the Third Article say again? "In the same way as He calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian Church on earth, and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one true faith. In this Christian Church He daily and richly forgives all my sins and the sins of all believers."

Luther is describing not only what *makes* you a Christian, but also what *keeps* you a Christian. Both are the work of the Holy Spirit alone, and both happen in the Church.

You might object, "When Luther uses the word 'Church' he's speaking of the Church in a spiritual sense, the invisible Church, not the church I attend on Sunday morning." I respond, yes and no. Yes, he certainly is talking about the invisible Church. But where does an



individual Christian find that Church? Is that Church an intangible idea, a purely spiritual reality, inaccessible to us? Or is that Church actually found in the church you attend on Sunday morning?

Be careful how you answer. If the church you attend on Sunday morning is something other than the Church in which the Holy Spirit keeps you with Jesus Christ in the one true faith and richly forgives all your sins, you have no more reason to go to church than to eat at Chic-fil-A.

But If the church you attend on Sunday morning is the Church in which the Holy Spirit keeps you in the one true faith and forgives all your sins, then you have every reason to go to church.

Thankfully, it was a listener who provided the most important answer to that open lines question, “Why do you go to church?” There were lots of other answers:

“I need the company of my fellow Christians.”

“I need a spiritual oasis from the world.”

“Church is my spiritual family.”

“The Bible tells us not to forsake meeting together.”

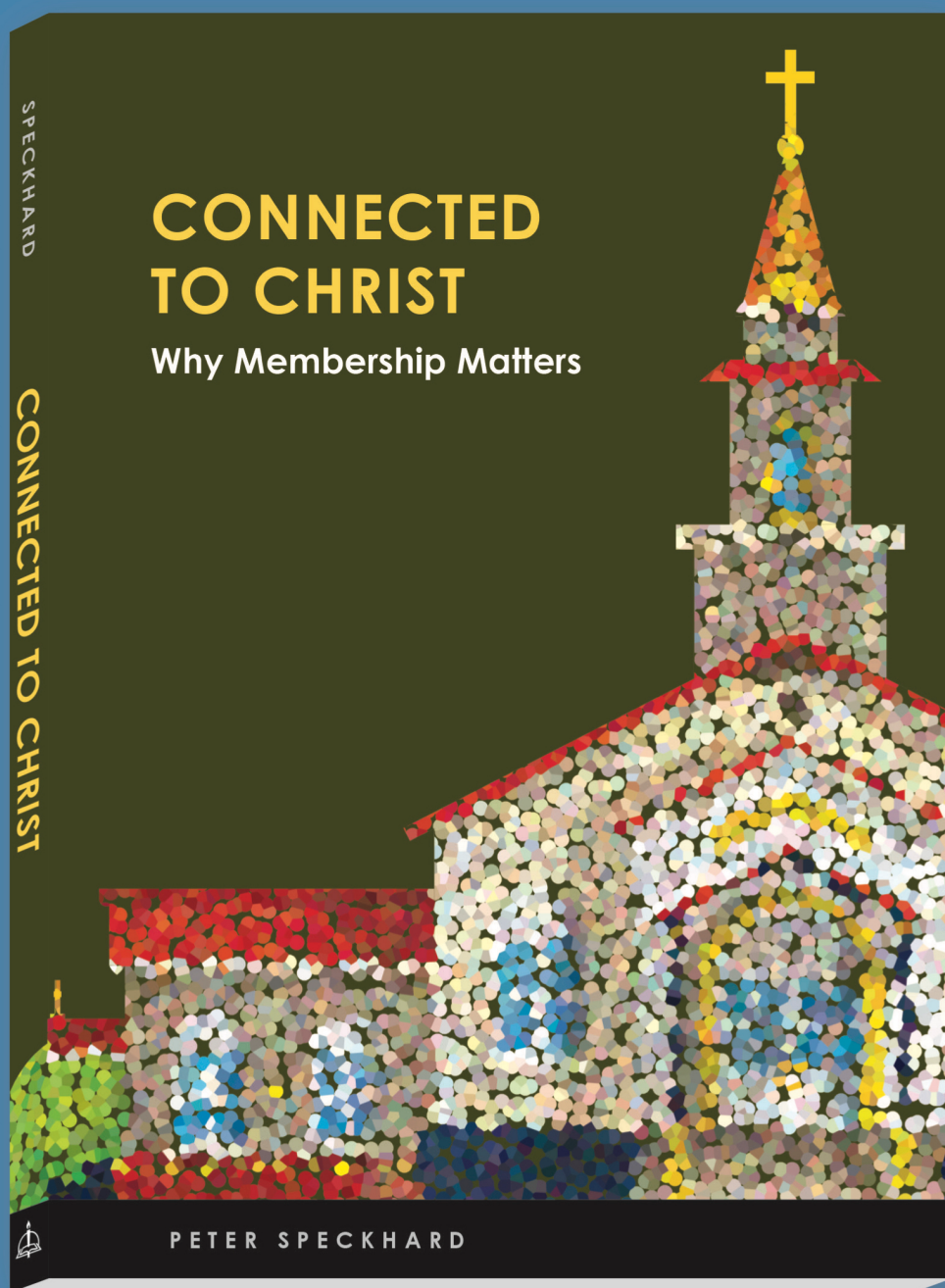
“My presence at Church is my witness to others.”

None of these answers are wrong. But none of them is THE answer. Finally, one listener put his finger on it: “I go to church because that is where Jesus has promised to be forgiving my sin. And that is the only thing keeping me a Christian.”

The minute I heard it I knew he was right. *I go to church because it is the only thing keeping me a Christian.*

In Matthew 18 Jesus is telling parables about how He finds lost sinners. He is teaching about the forgiveness of sin. He is talking how that forgiveness is distributed in His Church. Right in the middle of all of it Jesus says, “For where two

**Rethink what it
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or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them.” This is Jesus’ promise to be present forgiving sins where Christians gather around His Word and Sacraments. Luther writes in the Smalcald Articles:

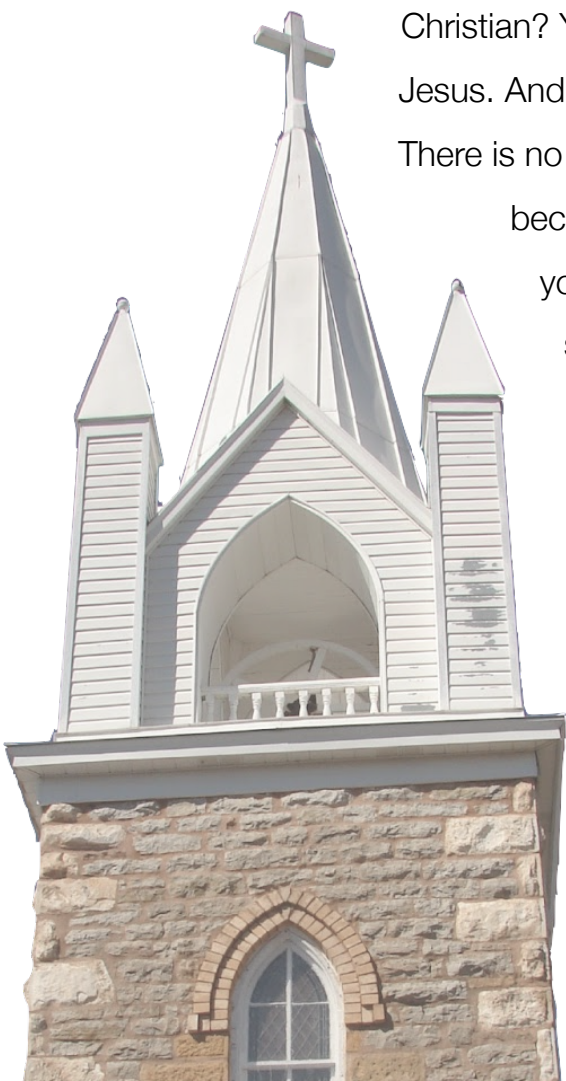
God is superabundantly rich and liberal in His grace and goodness. First, through the spoken Word by which the forgiveness of sins is preached. He commands to be preached in the whole world; which is the peculiar office of the Gospel. Secondly, through Baptism. Thirdly, through the holy Sacrament of the Altar. Fourthly, through the power of the keys, and also through the mutual conversation and consolation of brethren, Matt. 18:20: ‘Where two or three are gathered together, etc.’ (SA, II, IV)

Only in church—where Jesus has promised to be present forgiving sins through preaching, Baptism, the Lord’s Supper, Absolution, and mutual witness of other Christians—does the Holy Spirit make you a Christian and keep you a Christian. This is why you go to church.

If you stopped going to church, would you eventually stop being a Christian? Yes, you would. You cannot remain a Christian without Jesus. And you can’t find Jesus anywhere else than in church. There is no such thing as a lone-wolf Christian. You didn’t become a Christian by your own reason or strength, and you won’t remain a Christian by your own reason or strength. You didn’t make yourself a Christian and you can’t keep yourself a Christian. Stay away from church and you are going it on your own. You are staying away from the work of the Holy Spirit. If you decide to try it all by yourself, you will fail, you will fall from the faith, you will stop being a Christian.

This is why a faithful pastor actually cares if you are in church on Sunday. This is why such pastors regularly visit those who can’t come to

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church on Sunday by reason of health or other circumstance, bring them God's Word and the Lord's Supper, and remind them that if they cannot come to church, the Church will come to them. This is why, in the past, such faithful pastors would travel dozens or hundreds of miles on horseback to bring God's Word and Sacraments to isolated families and villages.

This is also why rather than simply “doing evangelism” or “doing mission work” the Church has sent pastors to plant a church—a place of worship with an altar, a pulpit and a font—where no churches exist. This is why the Church has chaplains serving the deployed military and those in prison.

One of the most common questions I receive is, “Pastor, my family and I live in _____, and the nearest Lutheran church is 40, 50, 100 miles away, what should I do?” I used to hem and haw, not knowing how to answer. Now, I simply say, “Drive however far you have to drive. Or, (and this never goes over well) consider moving closer to the church.” Ask yourself, what if your wife, husband or child had an illness that required them to regularly visit a hospital? How far would you drive? Or, wouldn't you even consider moving closer to the hospital?

We need to embrace all of Luther's explanation to the Third Article, not just the first half. If all you confess is that you cannot become a Christian by your own reason or strength, you are still a lone-wolf Christian, relying on yourself to remain so. But when you also confess that you cannot remain a Christian by your own reason or strength, then you have every reason to go to Church. You also have the comfort that it is not up to you, but up to the Holy Spirit to keep you with Jesus Christ in the one true faith, to daily and richly forgive all your sins, to raise you up with all the dead on the last day, and to give to you and to all believers in Christ everlasting life.

The real reason to go to Church is because Jesus has promised to be there in His Word and Sacraments forgiving your sins, and thereby keeping you in the one true faith. The real reason to go to Church is because Jesus has promised to be there keeping you a Christian. So go to church. You have every reason to do so.

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Wittenberg Trail: My Long Journey Home

by Dr. Mark Seifrid

My journey back home started with my journey away from my home within the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod in which I was raised. As with many young people, leaving home for the university started me on this road away from my Lutheran upbringing. As a high-school senior, I had experienced a remarkable encounter with Christ through a renewal movement that had swept through our small, suburban community in the spring before my first year of college. My encounter with Christ was simultaneously a confirmation and completion of all that I had been taught as a child and at the same time something radically new to me. At a small prayer meeting in a home, I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that Christ had died for me, even for me in the teenage rebellion that was so very common in the late 1960's and early 70's. Christ was not merely the Savior of the world, but also my Savior. That is a classic, reformational insight, that corresponded to all that I had been taught in Sunday School and confirmation classes. But it was also new to me. The awareness of Christ's love that flooded my soul was a dramatically new experience for me. Up to that point, I had known the Christian faith as doctrines to be learned (and, before all else, memorized) from *Luther's Small Catechism* and deeds to be done. But this encounter with Christ was something new. My long journey home was a path in which I gradually came to see how experience and doctrine belong together.

During my time at a large, state university, I was actively involved—in fact, overly involved—in a large parachurch group that was present on the campus.

After graduation, I briefly served on staff with them. At this point, however, I was becoming restless. The lack of depth of knowledge of the Scriptures and the lack of clear doctrine that was characteristic of this sort of ministry was not sufficient for the long term. My wife and I decided to leave. We headed off to an evangelical seminary.

The school we attended had a broad confessional statement. The faculty was evangelical, but diverse. I found myself constantly attempting to reconcile the Reformed theology to which I was then attracted with the Lutheran theology that I had been taught. That continued for a long, long time, well into my later teaching career.

I have been deeply formed and influenced by a number of persons. That is probably true for all of us. For me it was especially important. I lost my father when I was quite young. Although I was not aware of it along the way, in retrospect I can see that in a certain way I probably was looking for a theological father-figure, who would help me sort out the set of questions that I brought to seminary. I already had been oriented to the Reformed tradition by my former parachurch supervisor. And, on my own initiative, I had already allowed myself to be re-baptized while a university student. I was therefore quickly attracted to and strongly influenced by a prominent New Testament scholar, who stood in the Reformed Baptist tradition. Much of what I received from him was of lasting value. But I quickly learned that my inward questions about baptism and the Lord's Supper, which never really left me, simply could not be discussed.

For a time I supposed that these theological problems were mine. I simply had to get my own thinking straight and fall in line. But there were other people with whom I came in contact who likewise influenced me considerably — in the direction of Lutheran theology. One of them is Peter Stuhlmacher. I got to know

him during an academic year in Tübingen, while I was working on my dissertation on Paul's understanding of justification. Before all else, Stuhlmacher has deeply impressed me as a Christian who lives the faith he confesses. In him (and others at the Albrecht-Bengel-Haus) I encountered the healthy side of German pietism, in which life, Christian experience, and doctrine are joined. It was the very thing that I had been looking for since my years as a teenager. It opened a new door for me. I caught a glimpse of what might be. It was a first step on my way back.

Oswald Bayer also played an important role in my journey home. I first met him during a sabbatical stay in Tübingen. He was lecturing on Luther's theology, using the material that was soon to be published and is now available in English. I had already read his book on *Promissio* and was eager to hear him. His contemporary appropriation of Luther, his fresh thinking on what Luther's theology has to say for current questions of our culture was significant for me. Here was a living, breathing Lutheran, who was not merely repeating formulae, but thoughtfully appropriating them for life. And here, too, was a Christian, living in the faith he confesses. I found in him someone who practices Luther's *oratio, meditatio, tentatio*, in a way that few others do. Bayer, too, was a significant force in my return to Luther and the Lutheran confessions.

My own study of Scripture and reading of Lutheran theology also played an important role in the journey home. Deep inside, the Lutheran instruction and catechesis that I had received as a child never completely left me, but always brought me new questions in the new confessional context that I had embraced. In response to "the new perspective on Paul," I had written my dissertation on Paul's understanding of justification. A second book on justification, *Christ, Our Righteousness*, opened up for me the Christological center of justification that we find with Paul and with Luther. It also made me aware of the difficulty traditional



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Reformed theology has in fully appropriating this biblical view. It was at this point, that I sensed the beginning of a break with that tradition. Paul's realistic language in Gal 2:20 concerning his co-crucifixion with Christ and new life was an impulse to re-thinking the Lord's Supper. From the very start, the Apostle's realistic and corporeal language about the exchange of death and life in Christ in this verse and its context seemed to me to call into question the interpretation of the Lord's Supper as a mere symbol (Zwingli) or a merely spiritual union (Calvin). Paul is not speaking directly about the Lord's Supper in this passage, of course. But his perspective on life with Christ fundamentally corresponds to a Lutheran understanding of the Supper. I realized that the direct language of 1 Corinthians 10:16 ("The cup of blessing, which we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ") resists any attempt to read it as a symbol or spiritual allegory. Likewise, Romans 6 and Colossians 2 always seemed to me to be problematic for a Baptist understanding of baptism. Paul's realistic language again is hard to dismiss: "Do you not know that as many as have been baptized into Christ Jesus have been baptized into his death?" (Rom 6:3). I came to see that there were presuppositions that Baptists brought to the text that governed their reading of it — and the reading away of what Paul clearly says. Later on, a conference presentation that I heard on Luke 18:15-17 gave me further reason to rethink baptism. It is a classic text on the question of infant baptism, of which I already was aware. It is Luke who describes the parents as bringing their infants (βρέφη) to Jesus that he might touch them (and thus, implicitly, bless them). When the disciples try to impede them, Jesus intervenes: "Permit the children to come to me and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven is made up of such as these" (Luke 18:16). In this passage, it is clear that the children are mere infants who are brought by others to Jesus. They cannot come on their own. They are passive. Yet Jesus speaks of the children

themselves coming to him. There is a wonderful paradox here, in which the human response to Jesus is encompassed within the passivity of being brought to Him. It is true that Jesus did not baptize the children, as Baptist friends would observe. But that argument falls flat: Jesus did not baptize anyone. Those who brought the infants to Jesus for him to touch them surely came with the expectation that Jesus would impart a blessing to them. And Jesus does! He speaks of the kingdom as belonging to them. Everything that is necessary for a Lutheran theology of baptism is present in this story. Theologically I was changing. The journey home was underway.

The Reformed and Baptist context in which I was living, working, and teaching, also gave me reasons for rethinking theology. It quickly became clear to me that the Baptist ideal of a “believers’ church” is unattainable. Church discipline (which good Lutherans also practice) is insufficient. We simply cannot peer into another’s heart to see if they truly believe. Nor can we peer into our own heart, to see if we truly believe and follow Jesus. I knew of instances — not many, but real — in which (especially) younger people, who confessed Christ and had been baptized wondered if they truly had believed and wanted to be baptized again. For some, at least, the decision to follow Christ served as a quasi-sacrament — an entirely unreliable one. Again and again I could see how my good, Christian, Baptist friends lacked the comfort and strengthening of the sacraments that would make their faith deeper and richer and provide them with comfort. I likewise became dissatisfied with the Reformed doctrine of election, which to me purchases rational consistency at the cost of ignoring crucial texts about God’s love and saving purpose for all human beings. We should with our whole hearts be able to say to anyone and everyone: “Jesus died for you!” I came to prefer Luther’s flight to Christ in *The Bondage of the Will* to Calvin’s justification of a cold and distant sovereign God.

As I was making this journey, I developed and maintained contact with Lutheran friends. Some of them, whether I told them or not, knew that I was moving in a Lutheran direction. It was a matter about which I prayed and thought. I never dreamed, however, that I would receive an invitation to come to teach at Concordia Seminary in St. Louis. At the point at which it came, I was ready to change, to believe, teach, and confess the doctrine found in the Lutheran confessions. It was a surprise for which my wife and I remain grateful to God and all those who were involved in this invitation to return home.

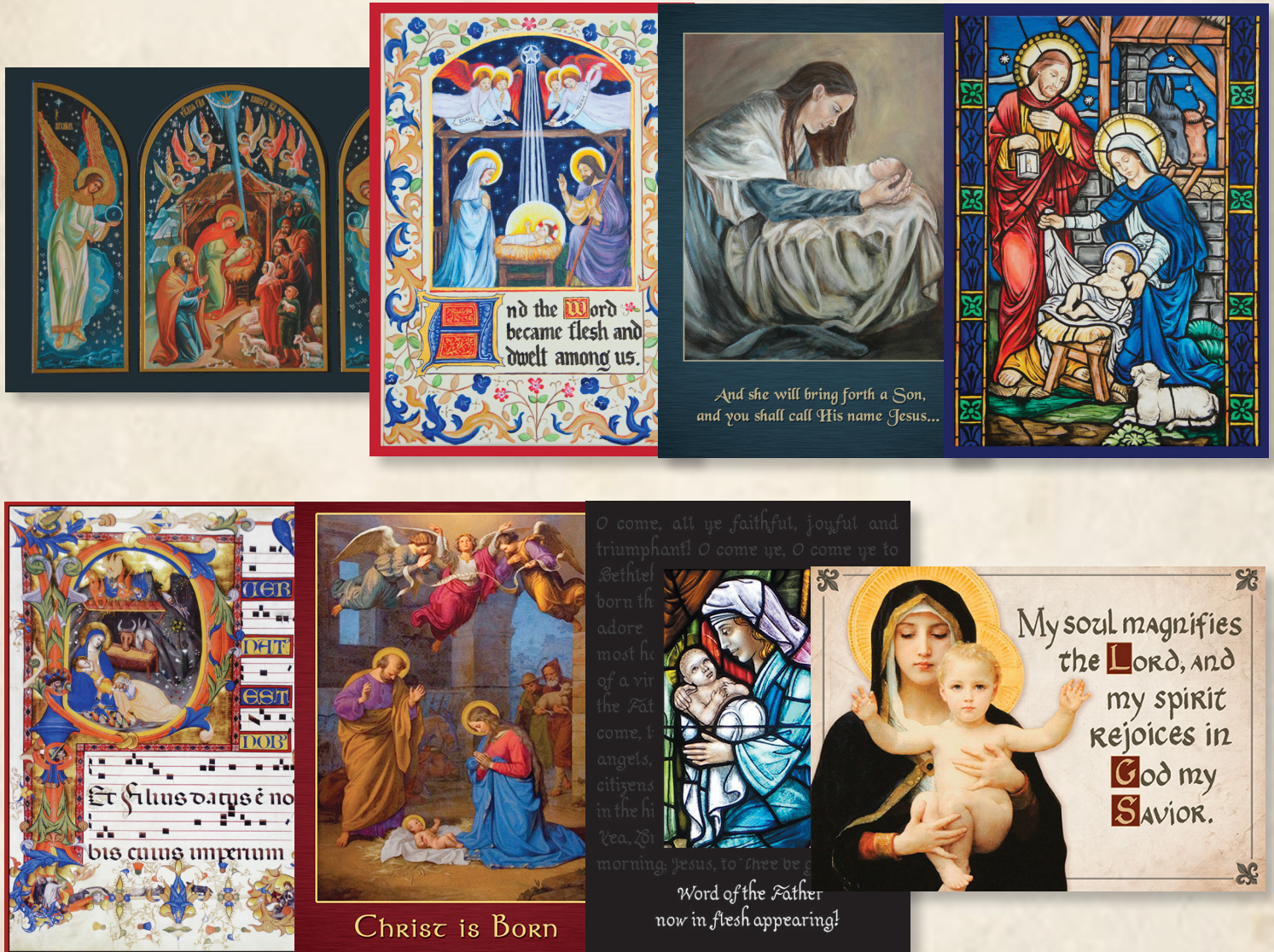


Dr. Mark Seifrid is a professor of Exegetical Theology at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis. A faculty member since 2015, he earned a Ph.D. in New Testament from Princeton Theological Seminary (1990); and a M.Div. and a M.A. from Trinity Evangelical Divinity School. (1984). He also holds a bachelor's degree in chemistry from the University of Illinois (1975). He has published major works on Justification in the New Testament and a commentary on 2 Corinthians, and is currently writing a commentary on Galatians. He has published numerous articles on Pauline theology and the doctrine of Justification. He taught New Testament interpretation at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary for more than two decades, where he also served as the Ernest and Mildred Hogan Chair in New Testament Interpretation.



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Zion Lutheran Church
Rev Robert Rojas Jr
16161 Marsh Rd
Winter Garden FL 34787
407-656-5751

GEORGIA

Trinity Lutheran Church
12391 Mercy Blvd
Savannah GA 31419
912-925-4839

IDAHO

Good Shepherd Lutheran
Rev. Tim Pauls
5009 Cassia St.
Boise, ID 83705
208-343-7212

Our Redeemer Lutheran
Rev David Reeder
407 S Hayes
Emmett ID 83617
208-365-5231

Peace Lutheran
Rev. Paul Johnson
600 Stevens St. PO Box 33
Filer, ID 83328
208-326-5450

Augustana Lutheran
Rev Jonathon Krenz
(Meets at 7th Day Adventist Church)
1015 West C St
Moscow ID 83843
208-892-9224

Shepherd of the Hills Lutheran

Rev. Neil Bloom
13541 W Highway 53
Rathdrum, ID 83858
208-687-1809

ILLINOISSt. John Lutheran

Rev. Jeff Caithamer
509 S Mattis Ave
Champaign, IL 61821
217-359-1123

First Bethlehem Lutheran

Rev. James Kellerman
1649 West Le Moyne St
Chicago, IL 60622
773-276-2338

Good Shepherd Lutheran

Rev. Michael Walther
Rev. Scott Adle
Rev. Aaron Mueller
1300 Belt Line Rd
Collinsville, IL 62234
618-344-3151

Calvary Lutheran

Rev. Mark Bestul
535 N McLean Blvd
Elgin, IL 60123
847-741-5433

Bethany Lutheran

Rev. Jeff Hemmer
5600 Old Collinsville Rd
Fairview Heights, IL 62208
618-632-6906

Christ Our Savior Lutheran

Rev. Bruce Keseman
612 N. State St.
Freeburg, IL 62243
618-539-5664

Concordia Lutheran

Rev. Stephen Mueller
316 S Oakwood Ave
Geneseo, IL 61254
(309) 944-3993

Hope Lutheran

Rev. Em. David Fielding
Rev. Alan Beuster
3715 Wabash Ave
Granite City, IL 62040
(618) 876-7568

St. Paul Lutheran

Rev. Ben Ball
6969 W. Frontage Rd
Worden, IL 62097
P.O. Box 247
Hamel, IL 62046
618-633-2209

Messiah Lutheran

Rev. Karl Gregory
801 N Madison St
Lebanon, IL 62254
618-537-2300

Zion Lutheran

Rev. Kirk Clayton
Rev. Ryan Buchmueller
101 South Railway
Mascoutah, IL 62258
618 566-7345

Trinity Lutheran

Rev. Peter Ill
Rev. Todd Wilken
503 E Washington St
Millstadt, IL 62260
618-476-3101

Holy Cross Lutheran

Rev. Wilfred Karsten
4107 21st Ave
Moline, IL 61265
309-764-9720

Bethany Lutheran

Rev. Seth Clemmer
Rev. Stephen Schumacher
1550 Modaff Rd
Naperville, IL 60565
630-355-2198

St. John's Lutheran

Rev. David Benning
300 E. Gibson St.
New Berlin, IL 62670
217-448-3190

Christ Lutheran

Rev. Jonathan Huehn
311 N. Hershey Rd.
Normal, IL 61761
309-452-5609

Zion Lutheran

Rev Donald Pritchard
525 N. Cartwright
Pleasant Plains IL 62677
217-626-1282

Good Shepherd Lutheran

Rev. Michael Schuermann
500 South Sherman Blvd
Sherman, IL 62684
217-496-3149

Trinity Lutheran

Rev Paul Hemenway
Rev Jonathan Holmes
220 S Second St
Springfield IL 62701
217-522-8151

INDIANA

Emanuel Lutheran
Rev Thomas Ludwig
355 Shaffer St
Arcadia, IN 46030
317-984-3651

Grace Lutheran

Rev. John Armstrong
3201 Central Ave
Columbus, IN 47203
812-372-4859

Redeemer Lutheran

Rev. David Petersen
Rev. Michael Frese
202 West Rudisill Blvd
Fort Wayne, IN 46807
260-744-2585

Calvary Lutheran

Rev. Kurt Ebert
Rev. Josh Reifsteck
Rev. Udhayanesan Raji
6111 Shelby St
Indianapolis, IN 46227
317-783-2000

St Paul's Lutheran

Rev. David Shadday
3932 Mi Casa Ave
Indianapolis, IN 46237
317-787-4464

St Peter Lutheran

Rev. Seth Mierow
2525 E 11th St
Indianapolis, IN 46201
317-638-7245

Grace Lutheran

Rev Daniel Mackey
601 N Reserve St
Muncie IN 47303
765-282-2537

St. Paul Lutheran

Rev. Peter Speckhard
8601 Harrison Ave
Munster, IN 46321
219-836-6270

Christ Lutheran

Rev. Adrian Piazza
10055 E 186th St
Noblesville, IN 46060
317-773-3669

Emmaus Ev. Lutheran

Rev. Dr. Don Richard Stuckwisch Jr.
Rev. David Seyboldt
929 Milton Street
South Bend, IN 46613
574-287-4151

Trinity Lutheran

Rev. Jordan McKinley
4413 South State Rd 135
Vallonia, IN 47281
812-358-3225

IOWAHoly Cross Lutheran

Rev. Kevin Johnson
1100 Market St
Carlisle, IA 50047
515-989-3841

Our Redeemer Lutheran

Rev. Michael Knox
904 Bluff St
Cedar Falls, IA 50613
319-266-2509

St Paul Lutheran

Rev. Nathan Dudley
2463 State Hwy 2
Clarinda, IA 51632
712-542-1505

St Paul Lutheran

Rev. Nathan Sherill
Rev. Timothy Frank
239 Frank St.
Council Bluffs, IA 51503
712-322-4729

Zion Lutheran

Rev. Jeffrey Keuning
309 Marshall Street, P.O. Box 127
Dexter, IA 50070
515-729-2977

Our Redeemer Lutheran
Rev. Kristian Kincaid
Rev. Jesse Cearlock
2145 John F Kennedy Rd.
Dubuque, IA 52002
563-588-1247

St. John Lutheran
Rev. Don Erickson
5092 480th St.
Germantown IA 51046
712-418-2637

Redeemer Lutheran
Rev Alexander Post
1600 S Center St
Marshalltown IA 50158
641-753-9565

Immanuel Lutheran
Rev. J.R. Wheeler
101 E View Pl
Osceola, IA 50213
641-342-3121

St John Lutheran
Rev. David Klinge
1956 Durham Ave
State Center, IA 50247
641-483-2578

Faith Lutheran
Rev. David Menet
1555 W Ridgeway Ave
Waterloo IA 50701
319-236-1771

KANSAS

Risen Savior Lutheran
Rev. Robert Weinkauff
14700 Leavenworth Rd
Basehor, KS 66007
913-724-2900

Grace Lutheran
Rev. Dale Dumperth
800 E 1St St
McPherson, KS 67460-3614
620-241-1627

Trinity Lutheran
Rev Kevin Vogts
34868 Block Rd
Paola, KS 66071
913-849-3344

Augsburg Lutheran
Rev. J. W. Watson
13902 W 67th St
Shawnee, KS 66216
785-331-3890

Bethlehem Lutheran
Rev Christopher Craig
308 N Indiana Ave
Sylvan Grove, KS 67481
785-526-7152

St John's Lutheran
Rev. Jon Bruss
Rev. D.M. Kerns
Rev. Roger Goetz
901 SW Fillmore St
Topeka, KS 66606
785-354-7132

Grace Lutheran Church
Rev. Geoffrey Boyle
Rev. Daniel Metzger
3310 E Pawnee St
Wichita, KS 67218
316-685-6781

Trinity Lutheran Church
Rev. Geoffrey Boyle
Rev. Daniel Metzger
611 S Erie St
Wichita, KS 67211
316-685-1571

KENTUCKY

Our Redeemer Lutheran
Rev. Michael Huebner
2255 Eastland Pkwy
Lexington, KY 40505
859-299-9615

Resurrection Lutheran
Rev. Curtis Peters
4205 Gardiner View Ave.
Louisville, KY 40213
502-458-4451

LOUISIANA

Redeemer Lutheran Church
1905 Highway 59
Mandeville, LA 70448
985-674-0377

MARYLAND

Zion Lutheran
Rev. James Oester
219 Cemetery Rd.
Accident, MD 21520
301-746-8170

Calvary Lutheran
2625 E. Northern Parkway
Baltimore, MD 21214
410-426-4301

St. Paul Lutheran
Rev. William Stottlemeyer
3738 Resley Rd
Hancock, MD 21750
301-678-7180

MICHIGAN

Grace Lutheran
Rev Aaron Schian
303 W Ruth St
Auburn, MI 48611
989-662-6161

Ascension of Christ Lutheran
Rev Daniel Grams
16935 W Fourteen Mile Rd
Beverly Hills, MI 48025
248-644-8890

St Paul Lutheran of Good Harbor
Rev Robert Wurst Jr
2943 S Manitou Tr
Cedar, MI 49621
231-228-6888

Emmanuel Lutheran
Rev. Joel Baseley
Rev. Paul Wolff
800 S Military St
Dearborn, MI 48124
313-565-4002

Redford Lutheran
Rev. Raymond Parent II
22159 Grand River Ave.
Detroit, MI 48219
313-535-3733

Zion Lutheran
Rev. Mark Braden
4305 Military St.
Detroit, MI 48210
313-894-7450

Epiphany Lutheran
Rev. Ryan Beffrey
4219 Park Ln
Dorr, MI 49323
616-681-0791

Immanuel Lutheran
Rev Mark Loest
8220 E Holland Rd (M-46)
Frankentrost MI 48601
989-754-0929

Our Savior Lutheran
Rev. David Fleming
Rev. North Sherrill, Jr.
Rev. Jeremy Swem
2900 Burton St SE
Grand Rapids, MI 49546
616-949-0710

St John Lutheran
246 N Ridge Rd
Port Sanilac, MI 48469
810-622-9653

St. John Lutheran
Rev. Joshua Ball
62657 North Ave
Ray, MI 48096
586-749-5286

Lutheran Church of the Incarnate Word
c/o Troy Historical Village
Rev Allen Lunneberg
66 W Wattles Rd
Troy, MI 48098
248-930-0173

St. Paul Lutheran
Rev. Steve Stolarczyk
6356 Center Street
Unionville, MI 48767
989-674-8681

MINNESOTA

Immanuel Lutheran
Rev. Donald Klatt
160 210th St. SW
Appleton, MN 56208
320-394-2358

St. Paul Lutheran
Rev. Peter Haugen
128 Fillmore St SE
Chatfield, MN 55923
507-867-4604

St. John's Evangelical Lutheran

Rev. Matthew Moss
 Rev. Matthew P. Johnson
 Rev. Steven C. Briel (retired)
 9141 County Rd 101
 Corcoran, MN 55340
 763-420-2426

Mount Olive Lutheran

Rev. Robert Franck
 2012 E Superior St
 Duluth, MN 55812
 218-724-2500

Immanuel Lutheran

Rev. Donald Klatt
 510 Olivia St
 Holloway, MN 56249
 320-394-2452

Trinity Lutheran

Rev. Donald Klatt
 1746 30th St NW
 Holloway, MN 56249
 320-394-2308

St. John's Lutheran

Rev David Markworth
 60929 110th St
 Hutchinson, MN 55350
 320-587-4853

St. Paul Lutheran

1324 9th St
 International Falls, MN 56649
 218-283-8642

Trinity Lutheran

Rev. Gregory Vollbrecht
 47334 132nd St
 Lewisville, MN 56060
 507-435-2434

Glory of Christ Lutheran

Rev. Jeremiah Johnson
 Rev. Kyle Krueger
 Rev. John Fehrman
 Rev. Dean Weibel
 4040 Hwy 101 N
 Plymouth, MN 55446
 763-478-6031

St Johns Lutheran

Rev. Christopher Horton
 14385 Blaine Ave E
 Rosemount, MN 55068-5929
 651-423-2149

Redeemer Lutheran

Rev. Bruce Timm
 2718 3rd St. N.
 St Cloud, MN 56303
 320-252-8171

Trinity Lutheran

Rev Jesse Krusemark
 29972 570th Ave
 Waltham MN 55982
 507-567-2272

MISSISSIPPIChrist Lutheran

Rev. Dr. James Holowach
 4423 I-55 North
 Jackson, MS 39206
 601-366-2055

MISSOURIGood Shepherd Lutheran

Rev. Warren Woerth
 2211 Tenbrook Rd
 Arnold, MO 63010
 636-296-1292

Lord of Life Lutheran

Rev. Mark Below
 15750 Baxter Rd
 Chesterfield, MO 63017
 636-532-0400

Trinity Lutheran

Rev. Rick Pettey
 601 Kingsbury Blvd
 Fredericktown, MO 63645
 573-783-2405

Zion Lutheran

Rev. Rick Pettey
 601 County Rd 202
 Gravelton, MO 63645
 573-783-2405

Immanuel Lutheran

4203 Tracy Ave
 Kansas City, MO 64110
 816-561-0561

Village Lutheran

Rev. Dr. Kevin Golden
 Rev. Dr. Matthew Harrison
 9237 Clayton Rd
 Ladue, MO 63124
 314-993-1834

Trinity Lutheran

Rev. David Oberdieck
 1300 Kent Dr.
 Lebanon, MO 65536
 417-532-2717

Trinity Lutheran

Rev. James Thomas
 4795 N Hwy 94
 Saint Charles, MO 63301
 636-250-3350

Hope Lutheran

Rev. Randy Asburry
 Rev. Daniel Preus
 5218 Neosho St
 Saint Louis, MO 63109
 314-352-0014

Peace Lutheran

Rev. Dennis Kastens
 Rev. Jonathan Ferguson
 727 Barracksvue Rd.
 Saint Louis, MO 63125
 314-892-5610

Prince of Peace

Rev. Dr. Mark Smith
 8646 New Sappington Rd
 Saint Louis, MO 63126
 314-843-8448

Concordia Lutheran

Rev. Alan Wollenberg
 836 Park Ave.
 Sikeston, MO 63801
 573-471-5842

St. Paul's Lutheran

Rev. Steve Riordan
 955 Hwy 109
 Wildwood, MO 63038
 636-273-6239

MONTANAChrist The King Lutheran

Rev. Ryan Wendt
 759 Newman Ln
 Billings, MT 59101-4742
 406-252-9250

Trinity Lutheran

Rev. Gerald Paul
 1226 1st Ave. N
 Great Falls, MT 59401
 406-452-2121

NEBRASKATrinity Lutheran

Rev James Moshier
 1005 9th St
 Arapahoe NE 68922
 308-962-7667

Trinity Lutheran

Rev. Jonathan Rathjan
 34 Alden Dr
 Auburn, NE 68305
 402-274-4210

St. Paul's Lutheran

Rev. Allen K. Strawn
 506 Main St
 Bridgeport, NE 69336
 308-262-0424

Immanuel Lutheran

Rev. Scott Porath
 1009 G St
 Eagle, NE 68347
 402-781-2190

Good Shepherd Lutheran

Rev. Clint Poppe
 Rev. Christopher Marande
 Rev. Luke Russert
 3825 Wildbriar Ln
 Lincoln, NE 68516
 402-423-7639

Redeemer Lutheran

Rev. Mark Ebert
 Rev. Michael Brown
 510 S 33rd St
 Lincoln, NE 68510
 402-477-1710

Lamb of God Lutheran

Rev. Philip Houser
 1414 South Washington
 Papillion NE 68046
 402-934-9045

Bethlehem Lutheran

Rev Micah Gaunt
 324 Kufus Ave
 Ravenna NE 68869
 308-452-3685

Zion Lutheran

Rev. Craig Niemeier
 1653 Worms Rd
 Saint Libory NE 68872
 308-687-6314

NEVADA

Grace Lutheran
Rev. Douglas Barnett
2657 W. Horizon Ridge Pkwy
Henderson, NV 89052
702-492-4701

NEW HAMPSHIRE

Immanuel Lutheran
Rev. Donald Colageo
673 Weston Rd
Manchester, NH 03103
603-622-1514

NEW MEXICO

Redeemer Lutheran
Rev Brian Kachelmeier
2000 Diamond Dr
Los Alamos, NM 87544
505-412-9682

NORTH CAROLINA

Our Redeemer Lutheran
Rev. Tod Rappe
1605 Van Buren Ave.
Fayetteville, NC 28303
910-488-6010

Trinity Lutheran
Rev. Thomas Olson
3353 US 176 North
Tryon, NC 28782
828-859-0379

NORTH DAKOTA

Zion Lutheran
Rev Dr Matthew Richard
420 1st St SE
Gwinner SD 58040
701-678-2401

OHIO

Zion Evangelical Lutheran
Rev. Wesley Hromowyk
766 S. Maple Ave
Columbus OH 43206
614-444-3456

Bethlehem Lutheran
Rev. Keith Witte
1240 S Maple Ave
Fairborn OH 45324
937-878-0651

Immanuel Lutheran
Rev. Michael Phillips
2120 Lakewood Ave
Lima, OH 45805
419-222-2541

St. Pauls Lutheran
Rev. Paul Schlueter
7960 State Route 38
Millford Center, OH 43045
937-349-2405

St. John Lutheran
Rev. Stephen Niemann
16035 County Rd U
Napoleon, OH 43545
419-598-896

Bethlehem Lutheran
Rev. Robert Green
7500 State Rd
Parma, OH 44134
440-845-2230

Shepherd of the Valley Lutheran
Rev. John Rutz
13101 Five Point Rd
Perrysburg, OH 43551
419-874-6939

Hope Lutheran
Rev Benjamin Meyer
15370 Meredith State Rd
Sunbury OH 43074
740-965-1685

OKLAHOMA

Trinity Lutheran
Rev. Christian Tiewes
1314 E 6th St
Okmulgee, OK 74447
918-756-6046

Grace Lutheran
Rev. Christopher Hall
2331 E 5th Pl
Tulsa, OK 74104
918-592-2999

OREGON

Holy Cross Lutheran
Rev. Alexander Lange
2515 Queen Ave SE
Albany, OR 97322
541-928-0214

Redeemer Lutheran
Rev. Eric Lange
795 E. Powell Blvd
Gresham, OR 97030
503-665-5414

Reformation Lutheran (ELS)
Rev. Steven Brockdorf
4435 SE Tualatin Valley Hwy
Hillsboro OR 97123
503-648-1393

Faith Lutheran
Rev. Evan Goeglein
8582 Rogue River Hwy.
Rogue River, OR 97537
541-582-0457

PENNSYLVANIA

Prince of Peace Lutheran
Rev. Michael Podeszwa
60 Rochester Rd.
Freedom, PA 15042
724-728-3881

Mt. Calvary Lutheran
Rev. Adam Koontz
308 Petersburg Rd.
Lititz, PA 17543
717-560-6751

Mount Calvary Lutheran
Rev Scott Kuntz
285 Highland Ave
Pittsburgh PA 15229
412-931-4500

St. John Lutheran
Rev. Robert Kieselowsky
25 E. Scenic Rd
Springfield, PA 19064
610-543-3100

Grace Lutheran
Rev. David Young
1169 W Street Rd
Warminster, PA 18974
215-672-8181

SOUTH DAKOTA

Mount Calvary Lutheran
Rev. Matthew Wurm
629 9th Ave.
Brookings, SD 57006
605-692-2678

Peace Lutheran Church
Rev. David Lindenberg
219 E Saint Anne St
Rapid City, SD 57701
605-721-6480

Christ Lutheran
Rev. Matthew Nix
4801 E 6th St
Sioux Falls, SD 57110
605-338-3769

TENNESSEE

Grace Lutheran
Rev. Larry Peters
Rev. Daniel Ulrich
2041 Madison St
Clarksville, TN 37043
931-647-6750

Redeemer Lutheran
Rev. Philip Young
800 Bellevue Rd
Nashville, TN 37221-2702
615-646-3150

St. Paul Lutheran
Rev. Robert Portier
1610 Pullen Rd
Sevierville, TN 37862
865-365-8551

TEXAS

Trinity Lutheran
Rev. Paul Harris
1207 W 45th
Austin, TX 78756
512-453-3835

St Paul Lutheran
Rev. Mark Nuckols
3501 Red River St
Austin, TX 78705
512-472-8301

Bethel Lutheran
Rev. Thomas Baden
1701 N Broadway
Ballinger, TX 76821
325-942-9275

Our Redeemer Lutheran

Rev. Brent McGuire
Rev. Adam Douthwaite
7611 Park Lane
Dallas, TX 75225
214-368-1371

Divine Savior Lutheran Church

Rev. Randall Wehmeyer
405 Ingram Road
Devine, Texas 78016
830-663-3735

Grace Lutheran

Rev. Carl Roth
801 W 11th St
Elgin, TX 78621
512-281-3367

Mount Calvary Lutheran
Rev. Thomas Baden
12358 Country Rd 5500
Eola, TX 76937
325-942-9275

Redeemer Lutheran

Rev. David Grassley
4513 Williams Rd
Fort Worth, TX 76116
817-560-0030

Holy Shepherd Lutheran

Rev. Christopher Bramich
1500 FM 156 S
Haslet TX 76052
817-439-2100

Memorial Lutheran Dr Scott Murray

Rev Sagar Pilli
Dr Christopher Ahlman
Rev Ian Pacey
Rev Robert Paul
5800 Westheimer
Houston TX 77057
713-782-6079

Our Savior Lutheran

Rev. Dr. Laurence White
Rev. Robert Hull
Rev. Kelly Krieg
5000 West Tidwell Rd
Houston, TX 77091
713-290-9087

Messiah Lutheran

Rev. Glenn Huebel
Rev. Tom Chryst
1308 Whitley Rd
Keller, TX 76248
817-431-2345

Pilgrim Lutheran

Rev Dr Jayson Galler
713 Florey St
Kilgore TX 75662
903-984-4333

Bethlehem Lutheran

Rev. Randall Smith
5084 Church Ln
North Zulch, TX 77872
936-399-5563

Faith Lutheran

Rev. Thomas Baden
801 1st St
Ozona, TX 76943
325-942-9275

Faith Lutheran

Rev. James Woelmer
Rev. Robert Hill
Rev. Mark Taylor
Rev. Steve Kieser
Rev. Kurt Ulmer
1701 E Park Blvd
Plano, TX 75074
972-423-7447

Lord of Life Lutheran

Rev. Joel Shaltanis
3601 W. 15th St
Plano, TX 75075
972-867-5588

Trinity Lutheran

Rev. Allan Eckert
3536 Lutheran Way
San Angelo, TX 76904
325-944-8660

St. John Lutheran

Rev L. Lynn Lubke
1000 N Crockett St.
San Benito TX 78568
956-399-3422

Hope Lutheran

Rev. Thomas Baden
417 E 2nd St
Sonora, TX 76950
325-942-9275

VIRGINIAImmanuel Lutheran

Rev. Christopher Esget
Rev. Peter Eckardt
1801 Russell Rd
Alexandria, VA 22301
703-549-0155

St. Athanasius Lutheran

Rev. James Douthwaite
114 Kingsley Rd SW
Vienna, VA 22180
703-455-4003

WASHINGTONPeace Lutheran

Rev. Daniel Freeman
Rev. Larry Bergman
2071 Bishop Rd
Chehalis, WA 98532
360-748-4108

Faith Lutheran

Rev Timothy Winterstein
171 Eastmont Ave
East Wenatchee WA 98802
509-884-7623

Immanuel Lutheran

Rev. Kyle Heck
2531 Lombard Ave
Everett, WA 98201
425-252-7038

Messiah Lutheran

Rev. Kurt Onken
9209 State Ave
Marysville, WA 98270
360-659-4112

Trinity Lutheran

Rev Kevin Schubkegel
301 S 18th St
Mount Vernon WA 98274
360-428-0290

Messiah Lutheran

Rev Trevor Mankin
7050 35th Ave NE
Seattle, WA 98115-5917
206-524-0024

Shepherd of the Hills Lutheran

Rev. Kerry Reese
Rev. Warrens Berger
9225 212th St SE
Snohomish, WA 98296
360-668-7881

Parkland Lutheran (ELS)

Rev. Glenn Oberberger
Rev. Samuel Gullixson
Rev. Steven Sparley
Rev. Alex Ring
120 123rd St S
Tacoma WA 98444
253-537-5492

WISCONSINSt. John's Lutheran

Rev. Christopher Jackson
E 5221 Church Rd
Algoma, WI 54201
920-487-2335

St. Peter's Lutheran

Rev. Christopher Amen
303 Park St.
Arlington, WI 53911
608-635-4825

Zion Lutheran

Rev. Tim Jones
110 E Grand Ave
Chippewa Falls, WI 54729
715-723-6380

Elm Grove Lutheran

Rev. Eric Skovgaard
Rev. Matthew Peters
945 N Terrace Dr
Elm Grove, WI 53122
262-797-2970

Mount Zion Lutheran

Rev. Aaron Koch
3820 W Layton Ave
Greenfield, WI 53221
414-282-4900

Messiah Lutheran

Rev. James Roemke
2026 22nd Ave.
Kenosha, WI 53140
262-551-8182

Mount Olive Lutheran

Rev. Jason Zobel
Rev. Dan Anderson
110 N Whitney Way
Madison WI 53705
608-238-5656

St. John Lutheran

Rev. Bruce Zagel
450 Bridge St
Mayville, WI 53050
920-387-3568

Peace Lutheran

Rev. Ricky Schroeder
1228 S Park Ave
Neenah, WI 54956
920-725-0510

Grace Lutheran

Rev. Brian Crane
3700 Washington Ave
Racine, WI 53405
262-633-4831

St. John's Lutheran

Rev. Jacob Gilbert
Rev. Dan Feldscher
510 Kewaunee St
Racine, WI 53402
262-637-7011

St Jakobi Lutheran

Rev. Travis Kleinschmidt
W 8089 County Rd A
Shawano, WI 54166
715-524-4347

Luther Memorial Chapel and University
Student Center

Rev. Michael Larson
3833 N Maryland Ave
Shorewood, WI 53211
414-332-5732

Peace Lutheran

Rev. Peter Bender
Rev. Gary Gehlbach
W240 N6145 Maple Ave
Sussex, WI 53089
262-246-3200

Our Savior Lutheran Church

Rev Michael Henrichs
Dr John Wohlrabe
6021 N Santa Monica Blvd
Whitefish Bay WI 53217
414-332-4458

WYOMING

Trinity Lutheran
Rev. Jon Olson
1240 S Missouri Ave
Casper, WY 82609
307-234-0568

Trinity Lutheran

Rev. Jared Tucher
1001 E 9th St
Gillette, WY 82717
307-682-4886

Redeemer Lutheran

Rev. David Bott
175 N. Willow St
Jackson, WY 83001
307-733-3409

CANADASt. Matthew Lutheran

Rev. Michael Keith
5021 52 Ave
Stony Plain, AB T7Z1C1
780-963-2416

Bethel Lutheran

Rev Jamie Bosma
264 Wilson St
Thunder Bay ON P7B1M9
807-344-8322



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Comment Line: (618) 223-8382
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