

Issues, Etc.

JOURNAL



Closed Communion:
Biblical, Historical, Lutheran and Loving

by Todd Wilken

Wittenberg Trail:
Assurance: The Journey to Lutheranism

by Nancy Almodovar

Winter—2020

A man with glasses and a clerical collar is speaking into a microphone. He is wearing a dark suit jacket over a white clerical shirt. The background is blurred, showing some red and orange lights.

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

Greetings in the name of Jesus.

For this issue, I have written a defense of the teaching and practice of closed Communion. Understanding the purposes of closed Communion to protect and confess, you will see that closed Communion is Biblical, historical, Lutheran and loving.

Dr. Nancy Almodovar has written our Wittenberg Trail feature. She tells her remarkable story of the profound doubt produced by her former Calvinist beliefs, and the certainty she found in Lutheran theology.

You'll also find a list of sponsoring congregations at the end of the **Journal**.

Enjoy this edition of the **Journal**.

Wir sind alle Bettler,

Todd Wilken, host
Issues, Etc.

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

Todd Wilken



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Closed Communion: Biblical, Historical, Lutheran and Loving

by Todd Wilken

It is Sunday morning. You and your family are visiting a Lutheran church for the first time. Lately, you have been dissatisfied and uneasy with your current church home. You have been learning about Lutheran theology through social media and your interest has been piqued. You want to see what Sunday morning at a Lutheran church is like. You have heard good things about this particular Lutheran congregation. So here you are.

As you are headed to seats, the pastor notices unfamiliar faces and approaches you. After some pleasantries, he asks you some questions. He seems very interested in your current church home.

The pastor then says something completely unexpected. “We will be celebrating the Lord’s Supper this morning, and we follow the historical practice of *closed Communion*. Since you are currently members of a congregation that teaches differently than we do on the Lord’s Supper and other important doctrines, I will not be able to commune you this morning. However, you and your family are welcome to come up to the Communion rail for a pastoral blessing. If you’re able, I would like to explain a little more after today’s service.”

You are a bit confused, but nod politely and go to your seat. Should you be offended? Is the pastor saying that you aren’t welcome here? You’re pretty sure you know what communion is. But what in the world is “closed Communion”?

This is how most people first encounter closed Communion. Many find this experience confusing at best and offensive at worst. But this is because the biblical, historical, and once virtually universal teaching and practice of closed Communion is now almost unknown, rarely practiced, and when practiced, most often practiced carelessly.

What Is Closed Communion?

Closed Communion is the biblical teaching and practice of offering the Lord's Supper **only** to those:

1. who have been baptized, instructed and examined,
2. who rightly believe in the bodily presence of Jesus' body and blood in the bread and wine, and
3. whose confession of faith (as indicated by their church fellowship) agrees with that of the communing congregation.

The practice of closed Communion has two purposes. First, to protect those who wish to commune from doing so to their harm. Second, to confess what Jesus has given us in the Lord's Supper as part of the whole Christian Faith.

Sadly, some today regard closed Communion as congregational policy rather than a practice clearly taught and mandated by the Bible. Others treat closed Communion as a necessary evil. While they retain the practice, they are sheepish and apologetic about it. They give the impression that they don't really agree with the practice, but are required to carry it out. And, some reject the teaching and practice of closed Communion altogether. They practice open Communion, admitting any Christian (or even non-Christian) to commune. Or, more commonly, they practice "close" communion, admitting anyone who can assent, in whatever sense, to a set of superficial statements about the Lord's Supper.

Closed Communion isn't a church policy, a necessary evil, or an unnecessary evil. Closed Communion is biblical, historical, Lutheran and loving.

It's All About Jesus

The Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, "This is my body, which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." In the same way also he took the cup, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." (1 Corinthians 11:23-25)

If we really believe what Jesus is saying about His Supper, how are we going to "do this"? Is Jesus' body and blood really there in the Lord's Supper? If so, what does that mean for how and with whom we celebrate His Supper?

Contrary to popular opinion, the teaching and practice of closed Communion is all about Jesus. It is His Supper, not ours. More importantly, it is His body and blood. Jesus and His Word tell us what the Supper is, and who should receive it.

It's Biblical

The first purpose of closed Communion is to protect those who wish to commune from doing so to their harm. The Apostle Paul tells us why this is necessary:

Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty concerning the body and blood of the Lord. Let a person examine himself, then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself. That is why many of you are weak and ill, and some have died. (1 Corinthians 11: 27-30)

Dr. Nancy Almodovar says, "The Lord's Supper is the only Sacrament that comes with a death threat." Throughout Scripture God punishes those who mishandle holy things. Whether it was the ark of the covenant (1 Samuel 5; 2 Samuel 6:1–10) or the sacred vessels of the temple (Daniel 5), the casual

misuse of holy things brings God's judgment. Likewise, Paul warns against mishandling the body of Jesus in the Lord's Supper. The practice of closed Communion serves to protect those who would intentionally or unintentionally misuse the holiest of all things, Jesus' body.

Is there any way to read Paul's warning that would permit open communion? Does Paul want those who are receiving the Lord's Supper to their judgment to continue doing so? No. Paul clearly wants them to stop doing so. Paul wants them to learn to discern the body of Jesus in the Lord's Supper, and then to receive the Supper for their benefit. In other words, Paul is urging the Corinthians to practice closed Communion.

The second purpose of closed Communion is to confess that Jesus has given us the Lord's Supper as part of the whole Christian Faith. Here again, Paul establishes the general principle that Christians ought to expect and strive for complete unity in doctrine.

I appeal to you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and create obstacles contrary to the doctrine that you have been taught; avoid them. (Romans 16:17)

I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another in what you say and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly united in mind and thought. (1 Corinthians 1:10)

Paul then connects this unity of faith and teaching to the unity confessed in receiving the Lord's Supper:

I speak as to sensible people; judge for yourselves what I say. The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread. (1 Corinthians 10:15-17)

To commune together is to confess the same faith together. To commune together when we do not believe the same things is to confess a unity that doesn't actually exist.

It's Historical

Closed Communion has been the practice of the Church from the beginning. The *Didache*, a document written in the first century, claims to be the direct teaching of the twelve apostles. In addition to the teaching and practice laid down by Paul, the *Didache* echoes the warning against mishandling holy things in the Lord's Supper:

But let none eat or drink of your Eucharist except those who have been baptized in the Lord's Name. For concerning this also did the Lord say, 'Give not that which is holy to the dogs.' (Didache 9:10-12)

Justin Martyr, an early second century theologian, mentions two prerequisites for receiving the Lord's Supper: Baptism, and agreement in doctrine and life:

This food is called among us the Eucharist, of which no one is allowed to partake but the man who believes that the things which we teach are true, and who has been washed with the washing that is for the remission of sins, and unto regeneration, and who is so living as Christ has enjoined. (The Ante-Nicene Fathers, Vol. I, Hendrickson Pub: 1996, p. 185)

For the Early Church, the boundary of Communion fellowship was very clear. Sometimes, what some might consider the smallest disagreement in doctrine or practice was occasion for the suspension or even the breaking of that fellowship. It was precisely for the purpose of protecting and preserving Communion fellowship that the Church of the first four centuries identified heresies, held ecumenical councils, and developed the ecumenical creeds. The Early Church understood that Communion fellowship was the sign and product of true unity in the Church.

One searches church history in vain for the practice of open Communion or even a lax practice of closed Communion. If anything, the historical practice of closed Communion is far more exacting than anything found in the Church today.

The fact is, the practice of open Communion is completely unknown in the Church until the 20th century. Apart from instances of the civil authorities forcing the union of two different churches, or of end-times sects, virtually every church practiced some form of closed Communion.

It's Lutheran

Closed Communion is biblical and historical. It follows, then, that closed Communion is also Lutheran.

The Lutheran reformers thought and wrote a great deal about the Lord's Supper. They were also well aware of the different doctrines of the Lord's Supper that were emerging in their day. They interacted with these teachings and refuted them.

In 1529, Martin Luther met with Ulrich Zwingli to discuss, among other things, the Lord's Supper. The two men reached an impasse over the meaning of Jesus' words, "This is my body." Zwingli denied that Jesus meant that His body was truly present in the Lord's Supper. Luther responded:

Our spirit does not harmonize with your spirit. Rather it is clear that we do not have the same spirit, for it cannot be the same spirit when in one place the Word of Christ is simply believed and in the other the same faith is ridiculed, disputed, denigrated, and attacked with any number of sacrilegious and blasphemous words. Thus, as I said before, we leave you to the judgment of God. (Volume 1. From the Reformation to the Thirty Years' War, 1500-1648 The Marburg Colloquy – Report by a Lutheran Eyewitness, 1529)

At the Diet of Augsburg in 1530, the Lutheran princes who would present the Augsburg Confession to Emperor Charles V refused to partake in a Mass followed by a Corpus Christi procession. They said,

As regards the procession of Corpus Christi tomorrow, our consciences will much less allow us to be present... If we were to attend the procession it would appear that we sanctioned this abuse... Even our opponents would very properly have reason to reproach us for engaging in a service which we had rejected as contrary to the Gospel. (The Diet of Augsburg: A Historical Life Picture, J.G. Morris, trans., J.K. Shryock, ed., Philadelphia: J. Fred Smith, 1880, pp. 199-200.)

Consistent with this, the Lutheran Confessions reflect a complete understanding of the proper boundary of Communion fellowship. They fully support the teaching and practice of closed Communion:

*Paul severely threatens those who deal unworthily with the Eucharist when he says, 1 Cor. 11:27: **Whosoever shall eat this bread, and drink this cup of the Lord, unworthily, shall be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord.***” (AC XXIV, 12)

*Thus the Mass is preserved among us in its proper use, the use which was formerly observed in the church and which can be proved by St. Paul’s statement in I Cor. 11:20ff. and by many statements of the Fathers. For Chrysostom reports how **the priest stood every day, inviting some to Communion and forbidding others to approach.*** (AC XXIV, 35-36)

*It is not usual to give the body of the Lord, **except to them that have been previously examined and absolved.*** (AC XXV, 1)

*In the use of the Sacraments faith ought to be added, so that, if any one use the Lord’s Supper, he use it thus. Because this is a Sacrament of the New Testament, as Christ clearly says, he ought for this very reason to be confident that what is promised in the New Testament, namely, the free remission of sins, is offered him. And let him receive this by faith, let him comfort his alarmed conscience, and know that these testimonies are not fallacious, but as sure as though God by a new miracle would declare from heaven that it was His will to grant forgiveness. **But of what advantage would these miracles and promises be to an unbeliever? And here we speak of special faith which believes the present promise, not only that which in general believes that God exists, but which believes that the remission of sins is offered.** This use of the Sacrament consoles godly and alarmed minds. (Ap. XIII, 20-22)*

*Hence from ancient times it has been called, in Greek, a “catechism” – that is, instruction for children. Its contents represent the minimum of knowledge required of a Christian. **Whoever does not possess it***

should not be reckoned among Christians nor admitted to a sacrament, just as a craftsman who does not know the rules and practices of his craft is rejected and considered incompetent... those who come to the sacrament ought to know more and have a fuller understanding of all Christian doctrine than children and beginners at school. (Preface to the LC)

Dr. Luther wrote, "I reckon them all as belonging together (that is, as Sacramentarians and enthusiasts), for that is what they are who will not believe that the Lord's bread in the Supper is his true, natural body, which the godless or Judas receive orally as well as St. Peter and all the saints. Whoever, I say, will not believe this, will please let me alone and expect no fellowship from me. This is final." (FC SD, VII, 33)

The Lutheran confessors understood the need to protect the those who wish to commune from doing so to their harm, and the need to confess what Jesus has given in the Lord's Supper as part of the whole Christian faith. They understood that the teaching and practice of closed Communion did both of these things.

It's Loving

So, closed Communion is biblical, historical, and Lutheran. But isn't it still *unloving* to exclude someone from the Lord's Supper?

Going back to Sunday morning, when the pastor tells you, "We follow the historical doctrine and practice of closed Communion. Since you are currently members of a congregation that teaches differently than we do on the Lord's Supper and other important doctrines, I will not be able to commune you this morning," is he being unloving?

Or, is the pastor actually doing the *most* loving thing he can do for you? He is protecting you from receiving the Lord's Supper to your harm and judgment. Is that an unloving thing to do? He is clearly confessing that what Jesus gives in the Lord's Supper is inseparable from the whole Christian faith. Is that unloving?

The question of love and closed Communion isn't new. In fact, Martin Luther addressed it directly:

It terrifies me to hear that in one and the same church or at one and the same altar both parties are to find and to receive one and the same Sacrament and one party is to believe that it receives nothing but bread and wine, while the other is to believe that it receives the true body and blood of Christ. And I often wonder whether it is credible that a preacher or shepherd of souls can be so hardened and malicious as to say nothing about this and let both parties go on in this way, receiving one and the same Sacrament, everyone according to his own faith, etc. If such a person exists, he must have a heart harder than any stone, steel, or adamant. He must, in fact, be an apostle of wrath. Whoever, therefore, has such preachers or suspects them to be such, let him be warned against them as against the devil incarnate himself. ("That These Words of Christ, 'This is My Body' Still Stand Firm Against the Fanatics", LW, vol. 37, Fortress Press: 1961, p. 54.)

What is Luther saying? He is saying that the failure to protect those who wish to commune from doing so to their harm is unloving. He is saying that the failure to confess what Jesus gives in the Lord's Supper is inseparable from the whole Christian Faith is unloving. Only "a heart harder than any stone, steel, or adamant" would allow someone to receive the Lord's Supper to his or her harm. Only "an apostle of wrath" would "be so hardened and malicious as to say nothing."

This is why that pastor approaches the Sunday morning visitor with the love and courage to say, "You are welcome here, but I am not able to commune you now." He is saying, "I love you. I will protect you. I will tell you the truth." Would it be easier for the pastor to just let you commune? Yes, much easier for him, but much harder for you. And how loving is that?

Why do we teach and practice closed Communion? Because it is biblical, it is historical, it is Lutheran, and it is loving.


And remember, it's all about Jesus. Jesus doesn't give us His body and blood either to harm us or divide us. But the misuse of His body and blood both

harms and divides. This means that closed Communion is a very good thing. We do not need to be ashamed of it or apologize for it. Rather, we need to confidently teach it and practice it for the good of, and in love for, everyone who wishes to commune.

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Wittenberg Trail: Assurance, the Journey to Lutheranism

by Dr. Nancy Almodovar

In 2005, my husband and I began to find that our Pentecostal/Charismatic beliefs did not align with Scripture. They were influenced more by a Reformed or Calvinist theology. However, there always seemed to be Lutheran undercurrents in our understanding of Scripture. Many of our Calvinist friends would complain to us that we were “more Lutheran than Reformed” in key areas. It would be another twelve years before we actually converted to Lutheranism. God providentially led us all the way.

It is not lost on me that God used the focus of my doctoral dissertation to bring me to the local Lutheran church (Faith Lutheran-LCMS, Mountain Home, ID) and Lutheranism. My dissertation topic was God’s providential care for His children, and His directing of our lives through good and bad. In 2016-17, Idaho experienced a rough winter. Many weather reporters called it the year of “Snowmageddon.” Living in a small town with no plows meant that my husband Bobby and I were unable to make the 50+ mile drive to Boise. There was ice, wind, and constant snowstorms. From November 2016 to April 2017 the snow just did not stop long enough to melt away. Instead, it became a sheet of ice, and we were stuck in our little cul-de-sac. Frustrated, yet knowing God was in control of the weather, we settled in for a long winter.

By December I was getting restless at being hindered from attending church. I missed fellowship, and I was hungry for the Lord’s Supper. At that time, I did not know why. Over the next few months, Bobby and I found the

program Worship for Shut-Ins (now Worship Anew). We enjoyed the hymns and preaching. After a few months, we contacted them to find a church closer to home, if only to attend when we could not get to Boise. Little did we realize how that would change everything for us.

My dissertation was a blessing in my own spiritual life. But it was also a cause of distress regarding assurance of salvation. In the Calvinist system, everything is pre-planned by God. Some have been chosen for salvation, and others chosen for damnation. Understanding this saddened me regarding my own place in God's plan of salvation. Often I would awaken at 2 or 3 in the morning, literally panicking that if I died at that moment, I did not know if I would go to heaven. The point of assurance for the Calvinist is your fruit. Knowing I still sin and that my fruit is often not what it should be brought distress to my soul. When studying Calvin's Institutes, I found this statement regarding what he termed "evanescent faith":

Experience shows that the reprobate are sometimes affected in a way so similar to the elect that even in their own judgment there is no difference between them. Hence, it is not strange, that by the Apostle a taste of heavenly gifts, and by Christ himself a temporary faith is ascribed to them. (John Calvin, Institutes 3.2.11)

According to Calvin, my faith may look, sound, and act right, and still not be true faith. Struggling to find assurance, I found only condemnation in this harsh, austere system of theology.

Think about this: you are struggling to figure out if you are among God's elect. What are you to look to? Mostly, the Calvinist will tell you Christ Jesus. But then he will quickly add that fruit is evidence of your regeneration. Calvin writes that the reprobate (those chosen to damnation and not salvation) "perceive the power of special grace" and "have the light of faith." To all appearances, "there is no difference between them" and the elect. Calvin goes on that they have tasted the heavenly gift, but Jesus has given them a "temporary faith."

How cruel can this be?

You only *think* you are saved. You are told to look at your fruit for the evidence that you have true faith. At the same time, Calvin teaches that your fruit proves nothing because you still may not have true faith. With no assurance of salvation, my Christian life began to wane as I struggled with whether I was among the elect or the reprobate.

In Lutheranism, by contrast, I'm told to remember my baptism and partake of Christ's holy food for the strengthening of my faith. I can actually know that I am His.

God's Providence

Since the weather hindered our attendance at church in Boise, by April we had contacted Worship Anew. They informed us about Faith Lutheran – LCMS. We began to attend, and God's Word began to do its work in us. As we learned more and more from the Lutheran Confessions, we saw that the Lutheran interpretation of the Scriptures was the clearest. Lutherans let God's Word speak even when we may not fully understand it.

God's Word says that "Baptism now saves you" (1 Peter 3:19-22), and all the promises of God are given to us at that moment. I had grown up in a Christian home, studied apologetics and theology for well over a decade, and read the Word of God consistently. How in the world did I miss this? Here was God's comfort: the promise that He has saved us, regenerated us, raised us with Christ through the Word and Baptism. No longer did I need to look inwardly via subjective experiences. I could point to an objective event and see that my sins were washed away. Ezekiel's prophecy says,

I (the LORD) will sprinkle clean water on you and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses and from all your idols I will cleanse you. And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will

remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you... (Ezekiel 36:25-27)

Wow! The new birth is given through the sprinkling of clean water. I'd read these passages, but never put two and two together. Instead, the theological gymnastics kicked in. I misunderstood that God works through water and the Word to bring salvation. Here, now, in the Sacraments (Baptism and the Lord's Supper) there was real assurance.

The attacks did not stop right away. But when Satan would taunt me in the middle of the night, I could respond with an objective truth: I am baptized. I could sing from the hymn "God's Own Child, I Gladly Say It":

Satan, hear this proclamation: I am baptized into Christ!

Drop your ugly accusation; I am not so soon enticed.

Now that to the font I've traveled, all your might has come unraveled,

And, against your tyranny, God, my Lord, unites with me! (LSB 594)

Now I had a real weapon against the fiery darts of the enemy: the shield of faith, strengthened through the Sacraments.

As Pastor Kellerman visited weekly to catechize us, we realized that our view of the Lord's Supper was much more Lutheran. Now I understood why many of our friends said this about us. Long before becoming Lutheran I had contemplated what Jesus meant in John 6:53: *Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you.* After this teaching, many left him. I had always wondered why, if Jesus did not actually mean it, He didn't just clarify His point so people wouldn't walk away. Yet, He didn't. For me, this meant that the bread and wine were something more than I was taught. As a Reformed believer, I understood the Lord's Supper to be a sacrament. However, it did not really do anything. It was a sign and seal, and not the true Body and Blood of our Lord. Through the Word, Bobby and I began to believe what Jesus said: "This is my Body...This is my Blood given for the forgiveness of your sins."

Here again was an objective truth which we could touch and taste to receive the forgiveness of sins.

Our Pastor wrote that we are now intentional Lutherans. I agree, even though I titled my book *The Accidental Lutheran*. Truly, by God's providential hand we were brought to the Church of the Augsburg Confession, and found that God's Word really does mean what it says. We can believe God's Word to be true without jumping through any theological hoops. This has given us assurance of salvation, and peace which passes all understanding (Phil. 4:7), given by the Gospel of peace (Eph. 6:15).



Dr. Nancy Almodovar is a professor of World Religions and holds PhD in Philosophy and Theology & MA in Christian Theology and Apologetics at Trinity Theological Seminary. Nancy has authored over 25 books. A speaker, author, teacher, professor, her passion is that believers will study the great doctrines of the Bible in order to be better equipped to proclaim the Gospel. Her blog is at www.LutheranGirl.org and is a distinctly Lutheran Perspective on Apologetics and Defending the Faith to neighbor, co-worker, family, and friend.



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JOHN 10:10

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619-583-1436

[Trinity Lutheran](#)
Rev. Matthew Payne
922 San Dimas Avenue
San Dimas, CA 91773
909-394-4555

[Grace Lutheran](#)
Rev. Dr. Martin Noland
Rev. FRank Balgeman
2825 Alameda De Las Pulgas
San Mateo, CA 94403
650-345-9068

COLORADO

[Risen Christ Lutheran](#)
Rev. Robert Macina
14850 W. 72nd Avenue
Arvada, CO 80007
303-421-5872

[Mount Zion Lutheran](#)
Rev. Carlton Hein
750 Cantril Street
Castle Rock, CO 80104
303-688-9550

[University Hills Lutheran](#)
Rev. David Vanderhyde
4949 E. Eastman Avenue
Denver, CO 80222
303-759-0161

[Christ Our Savior Lutheran](#)
Rev. Geoffrey Wagner
4022 Park Lane
Elizabeth, CO 80107
303-646-1378

[Peace with Christ Lutheran](#)
Rev. David Magruder
1412 W. Swallow Rod
Fort Collins, CO 80526
970-226-4721

CONNECTICUT

[Faith Lutheran](#)
Rev. Timothy Gordish
625 Poquonnock Rd
Groton, CT 06340
860-445-0483

DELAWARE

Concordia Lutheran
Rev. David Kummer
3003 Silverside Road
Wilmington, DE 19810
302-478-3004

FLORIDA

Gloria Dei Lutheran
Rev. George Poulos Jr.
7601 SW 39th Street
Davie, FL 33328
954-475-0683

Faith Lutheran
Rev Andrew Sorenson
1620 Pinehurst Rd
Dunedin FL 34698
727-733-2657

Hope Lutheran Church
Rev. Dr. Mark Moreno
4541 N. Wickham Road
Melbourne FL, 32935
321-622-6126

Grace Lutheran
Rev. Keith Lingsch
Rev. Mark Eisold
860 Banyon Blvd.
Naples, FL 34102
239-261-7421

Immanuel Lutheran Church
Rev. Randy Blankschaen
24 W. Wright Street
Pensacola, FL 32501
850-438-8138

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

GEORGIA

Christ the Shepherd Lutheran
Rev. Kevin Elseroad
Rev. Aaron Sterling
4655 Webb Bridge Rd
Alpharetta, GA 30005
770-475-0640

Living Faith Lutheran
Rev. Timothy Droegemueller
Rev. Aaron Simms
1171 Atlanta Hwy
Cumming, GA 30040
770-887-0184

Trinity Lutheran Church
Rev. Jeffrey Webb
12391 Mercy Blvd
Savannah, GA 31419
912-925-4839

IDAHO

Good Shepherd Lutheran
Rev. Tim Pauls
5009 Cassia Street
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 Street
P.O. Box 33
Filer, ID 83328
208-326-5450

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

Shepherd of the Hills Lutheran
Rev. Neil Bloom
13541 W. Highway 53
Rathdrum, ID 83858
208-687-1809

ILLINOIS

Bethlehem Lutheran
Rev. Marcus Manley
6351 N. 200th Street
Altamont, IL 62411
618-483-6756

St. John Lutheran
Rev. Jeff Caithamer
509 S. Mattis Avenue
Champaign, IL 61821
217-359-1123

First Bethlehem Lutheran
Rev. James Kellerman
1649 West Le Moyne Street
Chicago, IL 60622
773-276-2338

Good Shepherd Lutheran
Rev. Michael Walther
Rev. Scott Adle
1300 Belt Line Road
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 Road
Fairview Heights, IL 62208
618-632-6906

Christ Our Savior Lutheran
Rev. Bruce Keseman
612 N. State Street
Freeburg, IL 62243
618-539-5664

Concordia Lutheran
Rev. Stephen Mueller
316 S. Oakwood Avenue
Geneseo, IL 61254
309-944-3993

Hope Lutheran
Rev. Em. David Fielding
Rev. Alan Beuster
3715 Wabash Avenue
Granite City, IL 62040
618-876-7568

St. Paul Lutheran
Rev. Ben Ball
Rev. William Gleason
Rev. Will Weedon
6969 W. Frontage Road
Worden, IL 62097
P.O. Box 247
Hamel, IL 62046
618-633-2209

St. Matthew Lutheran
Rev. Timothy Kinne
Rev. Edward Blonski
24500 North Old McHenry Road
Hawthorn Woods, IL 60047
847-438-7709

Messiah Lutheran
Rev. Karl Gregory
801 N. Madison Street
Lebanon, IL 62254
618-537-2300

St. Matthew Lutheran
Rev. Michael Gudgel
305 Lemont Street
Lemont, IL 60439
630-257-5000

Zion Lutheran
Rev. Kirk Clayton
101 S. Railway St.
Mascoutah, IL 62258
618-566-7345

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

Holy Cross Lutheran
Rev. Wilfred Karsten
4107 21st Avenue
Moline, IL 61265
309-764-9720

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

St. John's Lutheran
Rev. David Benning
300 E. Gibson Street
New Berlin, IL 62670
217-448-3190

Ascension Lutheran
Rev. Matthew Gunia
7429 N. Milwaukee Avenue
Niles, IL 60714
847-647-9867

Christ Lutheran
Rev. Jonathan Huehn
311 N. Hershey Road
Normal, IL 61761
309-452-5609

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

St. John Lutheran
Rev. Mark Brockhoff
1800 S. Rodenburg Road
Schaumburg, IL 60193
847-524-9746

Good Shepherd Lutheran
Rev. Michael Schuermann
500 South Sherman Blvd
Sherman, IL 60193
847-524-9746

Trinity Lutheran
Rev. Paul Hemenway
Rev. Jonathan Holmes
220 S. Second Street
Springfield, IL 62701
217-522-8151

INDIANA

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

Grace Lutheran
Rev. John Armstrong
3201 Central Avenue
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 Street
Indianapolis, IN 46227
317-783-2000

St Paul's Lutheran
Rev. David Shadday
3932 Mi Casa Avenue
Indianapolis, IN 46237
317-787-4464

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

St. Paul Lutheran
Rev. Peter Speckhard
8601 Harrison Avenue
Munster, IN 46321
219-836-6270

St Paul Lutheran
Rev. Michael Blodgett
1910 N. Berthaud Road
New Haven, IN 46774
260-749-5444

Emmaus Lutheran
Rev. Dr. Richard Stuckwisch
Rev. David Seyboldt
929 E. Milton St.
South Bend, IN 46613
574-287-4151

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

Advent Lutheran
Rev. Marcus Mackay
Rev. James Grady
11250 N. Michigan Rd
Zionsville, IN 46077
317-873-6318

IOWA

Holy Cross Lutheran
Rev. Kevin Johnson
1100 Market Street
Carlisle, IA 50047
515-989-3841

Our Redeemer Lutheran
Rev. Michael Knox
904 Bluff Street
Cedar Falls, IA 50613
319-266-2509

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

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 Road
Dubuque, IA 52002
563-588-1247

St Paul Lutheran

Rev. John Koopman
805 Harrison St.
Emmetsburg IA 50536
712-852-236,7

St. John Lutheran

Rev. Don Erickson
5092 480th Street
Germantown, IA 51046
712-418-2637

Redeemer Lutheran

Rev. Alexander Post
1600 S. Center Street
Marshalltown, IA 50158
641-753-9565
Immanuel Lutheran
Rev. J.R. Wheeler
101 E. View Place
Osceola, IA 50213
641-342-3121

Faith Lutheran

Rev. David Menet
1555 W. Ridgeway Avenue
Waterloo, IA 50701
319-236-1771

KANSASRisen Savior Lutheran

Rev. Robert Weinkauff
14700 Leavenworth Road
Basehor, KS 66007
913-724-2900

Grace Lutheran

Rev. Dale Dumperth
800 E. 1st Street
McPherson, KS 67460-3614
620-241-1627

Augsburg Lutheran

Rev. J. W. Watson
13902 W. 67th Street
Shawnee, KS 66216
913-403-6194

Bethlehem Lutheran

Rev. Christopher Craig
308 N. Indiana Avenue
Sylvan Grove, KS 67481
785-526-7152

St John's Lutheran

Rev. Jon Bruss
Rev. D.M. Kerns
Rev. Roger Goetz
901 S.W. Fillmore Street
Topeka, KS 66606
785-354-7132

Grace Lutheran Church

Rev. Geoffrey Boyle
Rev. Daniel Metzger
3310 E. Pawnee Street
Wichita, KS 67218
316-685-6781

Trinity Lutheran Church

Rev. Geoffrey Boyle
Rev. Daniel Metzger
611 S. Erie Street
Wichita, KS 67211
316-685-1571

KENTUCKYOur Redeemer Lutheran

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

Our Savior Lutheran

Rev. Joshua Cook
8305 Nottingham Pkwy
Louisville, KY 40222
502-426-1130

LOUISIANARedeemer Lutheran Church

Rev. John Drosendahl
22531 Hwy 1088
Mandeville, LA 70448
985-674-0377

MARYLANDZion Lutheran

Rev. James Oester
219 Cemetery Road
Accident, MD 21520
301-746-8170

Calvary Lutheran

Rev. Kevin Barron
2625 E. Northern Parkway
Baltimore, MD 21214
410-426-4301

St. Paul Lutheran

Rev. William Stottlemeyer
3738 Resley Road
Hancock, MD 21750
301-678-7180

Lutheran Church of the Cross

Rev. Christopher Harrison
12801 Falls Rd.
Rockville, MD 20854
301-762-7565

MICHIGANGrace Lutheran

Rev. Aaron Schian
303 W. Ruth Street
Auburn, MI 48611
989-662-6161

Ascension of Christ Lutheran

Rev. Daniel Grams
16935 W. Fourteen Mile Road
Beverly Hills, MI 48025
248-644-8890

St Paul Lutheran of Good Harbor

Rev. Robert Wurst Jr
2943 S. Manitou Trail
Cedar, MI 49621
231-228-6888

Emmanuel Lutheran

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

Redford Lutheran

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

Zion Lutheran

Rev. Mark Braden
4305 Military Street
Detroit, MI 48210
313-894-7450

Epiphany Lutheran

Rev. Ryan Beffrey
4219 Park Lane
Dorr, MI 49323
616-681-0791

Immanuel Lutheran

Rev. Mark Loest
8220 E. Holland Road (M-46)
Frankentrost, MI 48601
989-754-0929

Our Savior Lutheran

Rev. David Fleming
Rev. North Sherrill, Jr.
Rev. Jeremy Swem
2900 Burton Street S.E.
Grand Rapids, MI 49546
616-949-0710

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

St Michael Lutheran
Rev. Paul Naumann
Rev. Jason Toman
7211 Oakland Dr
Portage, MI 49024
269-327-7832

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

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

MINNESOTA

Immanuel Lutheran
Rev. Donald Klatt
160 210th Street S.W.
Appleton, MN 56208
320-394-2358

St. Paul Lutheran
Rev. Peter Haugen
128 Filmore Street 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 Road 101
Corcoran, MN 55340
763-420-2426

Mount Olive Lutheran
Rev. Robert Franck
2012 E. Superior Street
Duluth, MN 55812
218-724-2500

Immanuel Lutheran
Rev. Donald Klatt
510 Olivia Street
Holloway, MN 56249
320-394-2452

Trinity Lutheran
Rev. Donald Klatt
1746 30th Street N.W.
Holloway, MN 56249
320-394-2308

St. John's Lutheran
Rev. David Markworth
60929 110th Street
Hutchinson, MN 55350
320-587-4853

St. Paul Lutheran
1324 9th Street
International Falls, MN 56649
218-283-8642

Trinity Lutheran
Rev. Gregory Volbrecht
47334 132nd Street
Lewisville, MN 56060
507-435-2434

Good Shepherd Lutheran
Rev. James Stefanic
1600 E. College Drive
Marshall, MN 56258
507-532-4857

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 Avenue E.
Rosemount, MN 55068-5929
651-423-2149

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

MISSISSIPPI

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

MISSOURI

Good Shepherd Lutheran
Rev. Warren Woerth
2211 Tenbrook Road
Arnold, MO 63010
636-296-1292

Lord of Life Lutheran
Rev. Mark Below
15750 Baxter Road
Chesterfield, MO 63017
636-532-0400

Mount Calvary Lutheran
Rev. James Gier
1215 Baldwin Lane
Excelsior Springs, MO 64024
816-637-9800

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

Zion Lutheran
Rev. Rick Pettey
601 County Road 202
Gravelton, MO 63645
573-783-2405

Immanuel Lutheran
4203 Tracy Avenue
Kansas City, MO 64110
816-561-0561

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

Trinity Lutheran
Rev. David Oberdieck
1300 Kent Drive
Lebanon, MO 65536
417-532-2717

Trinity Lutheran
Rev. James Thomas
4798 N Hwy 94
Saint Charles, MO 63301
636-250-3350

Prince of Peace Lutheran
Rev. Dr. Mark Smith
8646 New Sappington Road
Saint Louis, MO 63126
314-843-8448

Concordia Lutheran
Rev. Mark Martin
Rev. Allan Wollenburg
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

MONTANA

St. John Lutheran
Rev. Paul Shupe
301 Vail Avenue
Belfry, MT 59008
406-662-3776

Christ The King Lutheran
Rev. Ryan Wendt
759 Newman Lane
Billings, MT 59101-4742
406-252-9250

St. Paul Lutheran
Rev. Paul Shupe
404 S. 3rd Street
Bridger, MT 59014
406-662-3776

Our Savior Lutheran
Rev. Andrew Eckert
184 Pine Hollow Road
Stevenville, MT 59870
406-777-5625

NEBRASKA

Trinity Lutheran
Rev. James Moshier
1005 9th Street
Arapahoe, NE 68922
308-962-7667

Trinity Lutheran
Rev. Jonathan Rathjen
34 Alden Street
Auburn, NE 68305
402-274-4210

St. Paul's Lutheran
Rev. Allen K. Strawn
506 Main Street
Bridgeport, NE 69336
308-262-0424

Immanuel Lutheran
Rev. Scott Porath
1009 G Street
Eagle, NE 68347
402-781-2190

Peace Lutheran
906 N. California Avenue
Hastings, NE 68901
402-462-9023

Zion Lutheran
Rev David Kahle
1305 Broadway
Imperial NE 69033
308-882-5655

Good Shepherd Lutheran
Rev. Clint Poppe
Rev. Adam Moline
Rev. Luke Russert
3825 Wildbriar Lane
Lincoln, NE 68516
402-423-7639

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

Lamb of God Lutheran
Rev. Philip Houser
1414 South Washington
Papillion, NE 68046
402-934-9045

Zion Lutheran
Rev. Craig Niemeier
1653 Worms Road
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 MEXICO

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

NEW HAMPSHIRE

Immanuel Lutheran
Rev. Donald Colegeo
673 Weston Road
Manchester, NH 03103
603-622-1514

NEW YORK

Zion Lutheran
Rev. Timmothy Heath Jr
3917 Waverly Road
Owego, NY 13827

607-687-1205
Lutheran Church of Our Redeemer
Rev. William Terjesen
714 Hudson Avenue
Peekskill, NY 10566
914-293-0081

Trinity Lutheran Church
Rev. Gordon Naumann
23 Crane Road
Scarsdale, NY 10583
914-723-1998

NORTH CAROLINA

Our Redeemer Lutheran
Rev. Tod Rappe
1605 Van Buren Avenue
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 Street S.E.
Gwinner SD 58040
701-678-2401

OHIO

Mount Olive Lutheran
Rev. Jonathan McCall
2392 Noble Rd
Cleveland Heights, OH 44121
216-381-2873

Zion Evangelical Lutheran
Rev. Wesley Hromowyk
766 High Street
Columbus, OH 43206
614-444-3456

St. Timothy Lutheran
Rev. Joel Sutton
5040 Rye Drive
Dayton, OH 45424
937-233-2443

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

Immanuel Lutheran

Rev. Kevin Jud
1285 Main Street
Hamilton, OH 45013
513-893-6792

St. Timothy Lutheran

Rev. Joel Sutton
5040 Rye Dr
Huber Heights OH 45424
973-233-2443

St. Pauls Lutheran

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

Bethlehem Lutheran

Rev. Robert Green
7500 State Road
Parma, OH 44134
440-845-2230

Shepherd of the Valley Lutheran

Rev. John Rutz
13101 Five Point Road
Perrysburg, OH 43551
419-874-6939

St. John Lutheran

Rev. James Haugen
8888 Prospect Road
Strongsville, OH 44136
440-234-5806

Hope Lutheran

Rev. Benjamin Meyer
15370 Meredith State Road
Sunbury, OH 43074
740-965-1685

OKLAHOMATrinity Lutheran

Rev. Christian Tiews
1314 E. 6th Street
Okmulgee, OK 74447
918-756-6046

Grace Lutheran

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

OREGONHoly Cross Lutheran

Rev. Alexander Lange
2515 Queen Avenue S.E.
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 S.E. 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

PENNSYLVANIAPrince of Peace Lutheran

Rev. Michael Podeszwa
60 Rochester Road
Freedom, PA 15042
724-728-3881

Mt. Calvary Lutheran

Rev. Christopher Seifferlein
308 Petersburg Road
Lititz, PA 17543
717-560-6751

Logos Lutheran

Rev. Rob Kieselowsky
628 N. Broad Street
Philadelphia, PA 19130
215-992-9102

Mount Calvary Lutheran

Rev. Scott Kuntz
285 Highland Avenue
Pittsburgh, PA 15229
412-931-4500

St. John Lutheran

Rev. Robert Kieselowsky
25 E. Scenic Road
Springfield, PA 19064
610-543-3100

Grace Lutheran

Rev. David Young
1169 W. Street Road
Warminster, PA 18974
215-672-8181

SOUTH DAKOTAHoly Trinity Lutheran

Rev. Christopher Burger
2200 Lee St.
Columbia, SC 29205
803-799-7224

SOUTH DAKOTAMount Calvary Lutheran

Rev. Matthew Wurm
629 9th Avenue
Brookings, SD 57006
605-692-2678

Peace Lutheran Church

Rev. David Lindenberg
219 E. Saint Anne Street
Rapid City, SD 57701
605-721-6480

Christ Lutheran

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

TENNESSEEGrace Lutheran

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

Redeemer Lutheran

Rev. Philip Young
800 Bellevue Road
Nashville, TN 37221-2702
615-646-3150

St. Paul Lutheran

Rev. Robert Portier
1610 Pullen Road
Sevierville, TN 37862
865-365-8551

TEXASSt Paul Lutheran

Rev. Bryan Wolfmueller
3501 Red River Street
Austin, TX 78705
512-472-8301

Trinity Lutheran

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

Bethel Lutheran

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

Divine Savior Lutheran Church

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

Grace Lutheran

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

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

Redeemer Lutheran

Rev. David Grassley
4513 Williams Road
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

Rev. Dr. Scott Murray
Rev. Sagar Pilli
Rev. 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 Road
Houston, TX 77091
713-290-9087

Messiah Lutheran

Rev. Tom Chryst
1308 Whitley Road
Keller, TX 76248
817-431-2345

Pilgrim Lutheran

Rev. Dr. Jayson Galler
713 Florey Street
Kilgore, TX 75662
903-984-4333

Bethlehem Lutheran
Rev. Randall Smith
5084 Church Lane
North Zulch, TX 77872
936-399-5563

Faith Lutheran
Rev. Thomas Baden
801 1st Street
Ozona, TX 76943
325-942-9275

Zion Lutheran

Rev. Michael Erickson
1200 Duncan St
Pampa TX 79065
806-669-2774

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 Street
Plano, TX 75075
972-867-5588

Trinity Lutheran

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

Mount Calvary Lutheran

Rev. David Reedy
Rev. Craig Meissler
308 Mount Calvary Drive
San Antonio, TX 78209
210-824-8748

St. John Lutheran

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

Hope Lutheran

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

St Mark Lutheran

Rev. Peter Kolb
2000 Clay Avenue
Waco, TX 76706
254-754-0644

VIRGINIAImmanuel Lutheran

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

St. Athanasius Lutheran

Rev. James Douthwaite
114 Kingsley Road S.W.
Vienna, VA 22180
703-455-4003

Our Savior Lutheran

Rev. Gregory Cumbee
2800 Millwood Pike
Winchester, VA 22602
540-667-1459

WASHINGTON

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

Immanuel Lutheran

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

Messiah Lutheran

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

Messiah Lutheran

Rev. Trevor Mankin
7050 35th Avenue N.E.
Seattle, WA 98115-5917
206-524-0024

Shepherd of the Hills Lutheran

Rev. Kerry Reese
Rev. Warrens Berger
9225 212th Street S.E.
Snohomish, WA 98296
360-668-7881

Beautiful Savior Lutheran

Rev. Ryan Tinetti
4320 S. Conklin Street
Spokane, WA 99203
509-747-6806

Hope Lutheran
Rev. Craig Wulf
17909 E. Broadway Avenue
Spokane Valley, WA 99016
509-924-1630

Parkland Lutheran (ELS)
Rev. Glenn Obenberger
Rev. Samuel Gullixson
Rev. Steven Sparley
Rev. Alex Ring
120 123rd Street S.
Tacoma, WA 98444
253-537-5492

Zion Lutheran
Rev. Jeffrey Ries
3410 Sixth Avenue
Tacoma, WA 98406
253-752-1264

WISCONSIN

St. John's Lutheran
Rev. Christopher Jackson
E 5221 Church Road
Algoma, WI 54201
920-487-2335

St. Peter's Lutheran
Rev. Christopher Amen
303 Park Street
Arlington, WI 53911
608-635-4825

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

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

Mount Zion Lutheran
Rev. Aaron Koch
3820 W. Layton Avenue
Greenfield, WI 53221
414-282-4900

Messiah Lutheran
Rev. James Roemke
2026 22nd Avenue
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

Faith Lutheran Church and
Preschool
Rev. Michael Mathey
4009 Irving Street
Marinette, WI 54143
715-735-6506

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

St. John Lutheran
Rev. Mark Eckert
N683 County Road S
New Fane (Kewaskum), WI
53040
262-626-2309

Grace Lutheran
Rev. Brian Crane
3700 Washington Avenue
Racine, WI 53405
262-633-4831

St. John's Lutheran
Rev. Jacob Gilbert
Rev. Dan Feldscher
510 Kewaunee Street
Racine, WI 53402
262-637-7011

St Jakobi Lutheran
Rev. Travis Kleinschmidt
W 8089 County Road A
Shawano, WI 54166
715-524-4347

Luther Memorial Chapel and
University Student Center
Rev. Michael Larson
3833 N. Maryland Avenue
Shorewood, WI 53211
414-332-5732

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

Our Savior Lutheran Church
Rev. Michael Henrichs
Rev. Dr. John Wohlrabe
6021 N Santa Monica Blvd
Whitefish Bay, WI 53217
414-332-4458

WYOMING

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

Zion Lutheran
Rev. Jakob Berger
601 S. 9th Street
Douglas, WY 82633
307-358-2810

Redeemer Lutheran
Rev. David Bott
175 N. Willow Street
Jackson, WY 83001
307-733-3409

Immanuel Lutheran
Rev Paul Cain
Rev Rene Castillero
1300 W 5th St
Sheridan WY 82801
307-674-6434

CANADA

Bethel Lutheran
Rev. Jamie Bosma
264 Wilson Street
Thunder Bay ON P7B1M9
807-344-8322

Resurrection Lutheran
Rev. Nathan Fuerher
1011 4 Ave. S.
Lethbridge, AB, CA T1J0P7
403-915-4336



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Studio Line: (877) 623-MYIE
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