

For the

LIFE of the WORLD

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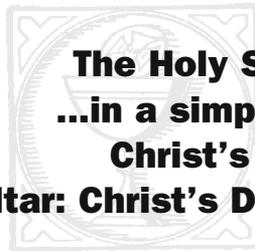
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Professor Historical Theology
Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne, Ind.

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Cover Photo: The cover photo features the Walther Chalice. Popular myth states that it is one of two ornate European chalices that were brought over to the United States in the 1830's by the Saxons. Photo by Concordia Publishing House from the collection of Trinity Lutheran Church, St. Louis, Mo.

COMING HOME

By Ron and Marge Shumaker



We first saw Grace Lutheran Church at night, illuminated on the horizon in the city of Albuquerque, New Mexico. The building had to compete against a challenging setting. Behind the church, the Sandia Mountains rose 10,000 ft.

against a moonlit desert sky. Across the street, a monolithic Mormon temple undergirded a tall steeple topped by a gleaming, spotlighted statue of the angel Moroni. On two sides silver-gray sage stretched across acres of open desert. Grace Lutheran Church competed spectacularly well. Interior lights glowed through the delicate watercolors of unusual stained-glass windows. Lighted crosslets pierced a square tower, which bore an orb and cross, almost Byzantine in effect. Such architectural beauty drew us into an unfamiliar area of the city to which we had just retired after teaching for many years in an eastern state.

As we entered the parking lot for a closer look, our initial enthusiasm received a check. The stone signboard marking the entrance read “Grace Lutheran Church—LCMS.”

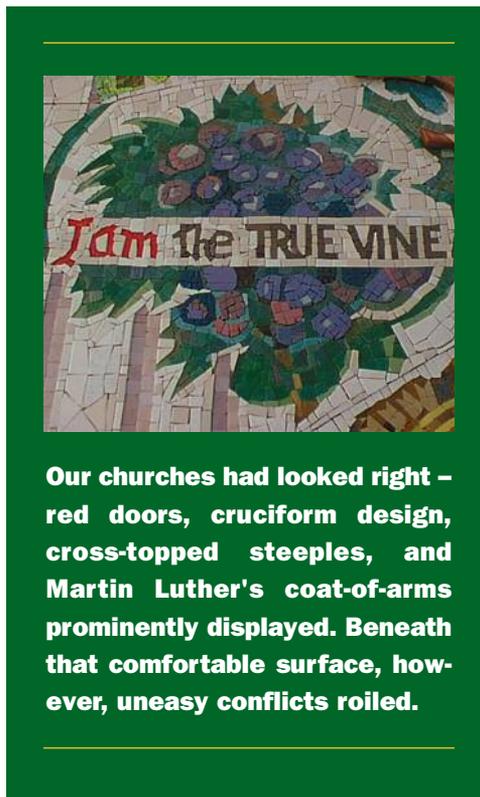
“Forget it,” said Marge. “Not another Lutheran church.”

We had had this experience many times—approaching a Lutheran church with the ardor of anticipation only to witness inside the recession of Lutheran orthodoxy, Reformation faith, and Gospel

reality. Our branch of Lutheranism, the Lutheran Church in America (LCA), had seemed to be faithful, seemed to be devoted to Word and Sacrament, seemed to welcome believers into a Christian family. Our churches had looked right—red doors, cruciform design, cross-topped steeples, and Martin Luther's coat-of-arms prominently displayed. The LCA was clearly our church home. Marge's entire family worshipped in an LCA church; Ron's mother's ancestors were among the founders of a colonial Pennsylvania Lutheran church; Tom, our son, was baptized, first-communed, and catechized in an LCA church. Beneath that comfortable surface, however, uneasy conflicts roiled. Our denomination undertook a long, complex study of abortion, concluding that the whole issue was best left to the individual. Our pastors increasingly described the Old Testament as simply Jewish history and mythology, to be read symbolically, if at all. Secular ideologies, like feminism and the elevation of toleration above all other values, occupied the attention of church publications, synodical conferences and, especially, campus ministry efforts. Ecumenism, universalism, liberation theology, the entire panoply

of mainline liberal concerns were visibly displacing Gospel teaching, evangelism, and missions at the center of the church's work.

By the late 1980's, we could no longer ignore the gap between our own belief and the direction of the church leadership. At that precise moment, the LCA joined in the merger which produced the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), and the three of us waited, wondering what this new church body would do. The answer was swift and devastating. A new, young pastor from an elite seminary came to our western Pennsylvania parish. A few Sundays after his arrival he treated us to a “feminist liturgy” complete with inclusive language, feminine pronouns, and prayers to the Mother God. Our previous pastor's thoughtful sermons were replaced by brief “homilies” on the agony of rejection felt by those who deviate from social norms, or the social obligations which should be the true center of our Christian faith. All of this was probably well intentioned and sincere, but it was dismaying in a church



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accustomed to hearing the Word preached from the pulpit, receiving the Sacrament each Sunday, and studying orthodox Lutheran doctrine. Our patience ran out when our son came home from a confirmation class amazed at the pastor's announcement that it wasn't necessary to read the whole Bible. Indeed, the pastor said he had never read the entire Bible nor had many of his fellow pastors.

After that we began to drift away, first to other ELCA churches and then to other denominations. For nearly a decade we searched, eventually withdrawing from membership in the ELCA. Since we frequently attended professional conferences and spent extended periods of time working on research grants or participating in seminars, we experienced churches in many regions of the country. We clung to the mainline denominations, hoping to find churches which combined traditional belief with the worship styles we knew and cherished. What we encountered in that search attests to the urgency of LCMS President Al Barry's recent pastoral letter concerning the direction of ELCA decisions. Our experience also bears witness to the indictment of liberal theology offered in "What's Going on Among the Lutherans" by Leppien and Smith (available from Concordia Publishing House). Their book explains historically and theoretically the liberal heterodoxy of the ELCA and other "mainline" denominations. What we saw "out there" dramatizes the effect of this theology when its gets translated into actual church practice:

1. In a large, beautiful ELCA church we visited, a silent congregation watched as a dance troupe interpreted the communion service. Blending modern dance and classical ballet, women in tutus and men in tights whirled and gesticulated as a recorded modern discordant setting of a non-denominational "liturgy" played over the sound system.
2. On an Easter Sunday morning, we listened to an ELCA pastor describe a bloody, dazed Jesus staggering out of the tomb, in which He had just awakened from a swoon. No triumphant, risen Savior. He was just an example of suffering and endurance.
3. In a Presbyterian church near his university campus, our son heard that no belief in a real resurrection is necessary. The true resurrection is just the "survival of the Church." This sermon was also preached on an Easter Sunday.
4. In a redbrick and white-columned Episcopal church, the priest explained to his congregation that the Fall of Man occurred when Cain slew Abel.
5. In a Midwestern city we decided against visiting a Methodist church in which the women's group was sponsoring prayers and dances to Gaia, the Earth Goddess.
6. On a Palm Sunday, we attended an Episcopal cathedral in which the Passion story was enacted as a dramatic reading. All of the readers were women--except two. Men were assigned the parts of Pilate and Judas Iscariot. No one seemed to notice the incongruity when the actress playing the part of Christ read, "I am the Son . . ."

To this list we could add countless examples from across the spectrum of liberal Protestantism. We heard from the pulpit that the real victim in an abortion is the mother; that the best example of marriage in our neighborhood is probably the gay couple down the street; and that the blame for the Littleton, Colorado, tragedy is neither human depravity nor Satan, but the failure of government to provide for "our children's" needs. We have heard Jesus' words, "I am the Way . . ." contorted into a universalist



demand for inclusiveness. And, at an ELCA parochial school in which she substituted, Marge observed in silent amazement as the pastor harangued a fourth-grade class on the sin of homophobia, not homosexuality. The music teacher sitting beside her, another horrified Lutheran lost in the brave new world of ELCA theology, explained that the pastor was recycling the sermon he had delivered on the preceding Sunday.

Sitting in the parking lot of Grace Lutheran Church—LCMS on that spring night, therefore, we were not drawn by the word "Lutheran." As we drove away, our son quietly pointed out that this beautiful new edifice was a Missouri Synod Lutheran Church. Better informed than we, far ahead of us theologically, he had read much about Missouri Lutheranism. Since there are few Missouri Synod churches in western Pennsylvania and none close to the small college town where we lived for many years, neither of us fully understood the differences between the ELCA and the LCMS. Our son argued patiently for the orthodoxy, scriptural faithfulness and doctrinal purity of the Missouri Synod. In short, he persuaded us to try Grace Lutheran Church, and our first Sunday there proved to be the wonderful homecoming God had planned for us at the end of our decade of searching.

We have found at Grace a warm welcome, powerful preaching, orthodox teaching, beautiful music and liturgy, adherence to the Gospel, and a biblical perspective on social and moral issues. In the words of Ephesians 2:19-20, "[we] are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus Himself as the chief cornerstone."

Along with our gratitude, however, we offer an admonition. Our experience has taught us how easily a church body can lose its tradition, its focus, and even its faith. Missouri Synod Lutherans, more than ever, must keep the light of Christian truth burning--in faithful teaching, faithful Scriptural interpretation, and faithful dedication to doctrine and liturgy. Today we worry when we read letters to church publications urging accommodation of Lutheran worship and liturgy to the ethos of contemporary culture. We fear when voices in the church body accuse seminaries of "liturgical legalism." We recoil when "ecumenism" or "Lutheran unity" is elevated at the expense of the enduring truth of the historic Lutheran confessions. We have seen it all before. We know that the wide boulevard of accommodation leads into the desert wilderness of unbelieving churches. The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod is indeed an oasis in that desert for searchers like us. The church must never surrender the sovereignty of the Lord Jesus Christ or compromise its Lutheran tradition.

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