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For the Life of the World

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Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture verses are from the English Standard Version (ESV).

FEATURES

4 **Worship Coming Out of the Pandemic** By Rev. Todd A. Peperkorn

Everyone has been trying to figure this out from day one. As we have tried to work through and make sense of all of these things, decision fatigue can easily set in. Because of that, remembering how to show charity toward brother pastors and our sister congregations has never been more important.

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Since our Lord proclaimed, before the fall into sin, “It is not good that the man should be alone” (Gen. 2:18), it’s clear we’re meant to be together. However, we live in largely lonely times. Loneliness has been on the increase in the United States for decades. Before COVID-19, the majority of Americans reported being isolated with the youngest adults (18–22 year-olds) being the loneliest of all. The lockdowns because of COVID-19 only exacerbated this isolation. What might we learn from the challenges of COVID in our already lonely society?

10 **What Is It to “Be the Church”?** By Dr. Adam C. Koontz

In the distant land of pre-coronavirus America, some congregations would take a Sunday off to “be the Church” in their community. The Divine Service was replaced with community service, with the understandable but misplaced idea that the Church is defined by what the members are doing, not by what the Lord is doing among them. For many Christians, the church is what the Church does, not whom the Lord gathers. The Church is defined by her Head, Christ Jesus, as the branches live from the Vine. Where He is, there she is. If He is preached, she is there.

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Pastoral Care in a Lonely World

David C. Fleming

Since our Lord proclaimed, before the fall into sin, “It is not good that the man should be alone” (Gen. 2:18), it’s clear we’re meant to be together. However, we live in largely lonely times. Loneliness has been on the increase in the United States for decades. Both England and Japan are even lonelier, now both possessing a cabinet level “minister of loneliness.” Cigna’s 2018 survey found that nearly half of Americans do not have a daily meaningful conversation. Before COVID-19, the majority of Americans reported being isolated, with the youngest adults (18–22 year-olds) being the loneliest of all. The lockdowns because of COVID-19 only exacerbated this isolation. Loneliness has been reported as being as threatening to one’s health as smoking 15 cigarettes a day.



Photo: Erik M. Lunsford/The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod

What might we learn from the challenges of COVID in our already lonely society? I offer four things I have learned or re-learned. First, the Divine Service is vital; it is the ordinary means for the care of souls. Second, congregations need pastors. Third, pastors need pastors. Fourth, generally, congregations that viewed themselves as a family flourished during the pandemic; whereas, those that viewed themselves as a corporation languished during COVID-19.

Years before COVID-19, I officiated at my only double funeral for a father and son. The father had died in isolation because of a raging infection. His son was unable to be with his father in his last hours because the son had a compromised immune system. Consequently, the son was only able to say goodbye to his father by recording a message that was then replayed to his dad on his death bed. The father died late that night. The heartbroken 49-year-old son died the next morning.

Since last year, Our Savior Lutheran Church, Grand Rapids, Michigan (where I serve with Pastors Jeremy Swem and North Sherrill), has seen a high number of homebound deaths. No one died from COVID, but in all but one case, isolation contributed to these deaths. Family, friends, and pastors were mostly prohibited from visiting. We pastors were only able to be at half of the death beds. Until recently we weren't able to have a regular funeral for anyone. This is heartbreaking to family, friends, and pastors too.

Faithful Lutherans, pastors and laity alike, have sought ways to encourage our isolated brothers and sisters. Of course, our congregations are to be gathered together around our Lord's incarnate gifts of Baptism, the preaching of the Word of Christ, and His very Body and Blood in the Blessed Sacrament of the Altar. However, during this odd time, many have been unable or unwilling to be there. Here's a sample of what some have done to mitigate loneliness:

- ✦ I know of one pastor who has taken to writing handwritten letters of encouragement to congregation members who cannot be visited in person. These have been warmly received.
- ✦ Many pastors have made countless phone calls to have pastoral care conversations with isolated souls.
- ✦ The children's choir at Our Savior, Grand Rapids, led by Kantor Christina Roberts, sang hymns outside the care facilities and homes of homebound members. At one care facility, not only was our member's window open to hear the joyful voices, but dozens of other windows were opened by lonely seniors eager to listen and to join in singing. There were tears of joy all around.
- ✦ Some families, fellow members, and pastors have visited through windows.
- ✦ Others have been able to receive streaming of sermons, Bible studies, and hymns from their churches.

What might we learn from the challenges of COVID in our already lonely society? I offer four things I have learned or re-learned.

First, the Divine Service is vital; it is the ordinary means for the care of souls. Before the pandemic it was easy for us to take for granted the weekly gathering of our brothers and sisters in Christ around the Lord's Word and Blessed Sacrament. COVID has reminded us never to underestimate the richness of our Lord Jesus coming to us to call us to repent,

Photos: Erik M. Lunsford/The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod



to forgive us, cleanse us, teach us, and touch us to bless us.

Some congregations never missed a service. Some adapted by having services of ten or fewer. Some, like us, suspended in-person services for a while. When we returned on Easter of 2020, even though our distribution of Christ's Body and Blood was unusual, members eagerly (and often with tears of joy) received the Lord's Supper.

Second, congregations need pastors. We knew we needed pastors before, of course, but the unique challenges of COVID made it even more evident. I've been privileged to visit with many pastors during the pandemic, and I discovered that no two congregations handled this situation the same way. This demonstrates the Lord's wisdom in placing one or more of His servants in each congregation. These faithful pastors guided their congregations through the myriad of decisions for the purpose of delivering the Gospel of Jesus Christ to needy souls. Instead of being driven by directives from afar, each pastor and congregation were able to nimbly adapt to changing governmental edicts, community issues, and individual concerns.

I am exceedingly thankful for my faithful professors at Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne, and those serving now, who did not specifically prepare pastors and deaconesses for COVID—they had no idea it was coming—but who did teach us to think and act pastorally and faithfully,


so that we could adapt to the changing challenges we encountered. I'm thankful that one of my professors made sure I read Luther's insights on whether one could flee a plague. There Luther gives people lots of freedom to do what appears best, while grounding pastors in the responsibility to serve the souls entrusted to their care while following the best medical protocols of their day.

In talking with pastors and parishioners around the country, I've heard grateful thanksgiving by congregants for their pastors and pastors for their congregations, each rejoicing in how they've negotiated these days. Of course, there's been some painful exchanges too. In a time of fear and anxiety, folks don't always speak in the kindest and most helpful ways. Happily, our Lord is in the forgiveness and restoration business. He absolves and reunites sinners daily and will continue to do so in the future with its uncertainty.

Third, pastors need pastors. "Every pastor needs a pastor" is a refrain that the Rev. Dr. Harold Senkbeil and Dr. Beverly Yahnke have woven into DOXOLOGY's 14 years of training pastors in the care of souls. To hear confession of sins and absolve, pastors need to confess their sins and be absolved. Just as it benefits congregants to hear the Word of the Lord spoken by their pastor, so it benefits pastors to be strengthened and encouraged by the Word proclaimed to them. Additionally, conversation between brother pastors helps each to faithfully and creatively

serve as physicians of souls. Pastors can experience isolation as well, and brother pastors can be dear friends.

Fourth, generally, congregations that viewed themselves as a family flourished during the pandemic; whereas, those that viewed themselves as a corporation languished during COVID-19. In closely-knit congregations fellow members called, wrote to, and encouraged each other with even more intensity than before. It makes sense, families are designed to rally together when times are tough.

In *Christ and Calamity*, a devotional book written during the pandemic, the Rev. Dr. Harold L. Senkbeil offers a beautiful reminder to us all in our isolation and trouble. Where there is calamity, there is Christ with us. As the Lord promises: "I will never leave you nor forsake you" (Heb. 13:5). 

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