Online Technology in the Church: Study Materials

Preface

2023 Resolution 5-13A asked the Commission on Theology and Church Relations (CTCR), in conjunction with the Council of Presidents and the Office of the President of the Synod, to produce a joint document on uses of online technology in the church. The document would provide for "appropriate theological reflection and study," to take place over a period of "not less than a year that allows for much fraternal discussion." After consulting with representatives of both the Council of Presidents and the Office of the President, it was decided the CTCR would provide a study document on the uses of online technology in the church that would then be shared with the above-named entities, who would disseminate it throughout the Synod.

To that end, the Commission, jointly with the Council of Presidents and the Office of the President, submits the present study document for consideration. Rather than attempting to address comprehensively all technologies that are presently being used in the church, or might be used in the future, this document has selectively chosen only some of the more representative examples likely to be employed within our congregations, and which have either incited controversy or engendered differences of opinion and practice. The Commission has sought to provide a fair presentation and evaluation of these practices and has also attempted to offer its own theological and practical perspective on their appropriateness in the church. However, this is a study document and therefore does not propose an "official" position the Synod should take on these matters. In fact, in most cases of rapidly evolving technologies and their application in church life, it would be difficult, if not impossible, for the Synod to take a firm position (the practice of virtual Communion being a notable exception — see 2023 Resolution 5-08A).

The Commission asks the responsible entities — the Council of Presidents and the Office of the President of the Synod — to distribute this study document to those under their oversight, in accordance with 2023 Resolution 5-13A. The CTCR wishes to make this document available for Synodwide study and use.

The Commission on Theology and Church Relations
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Introduction

Lutherans have long availed themselves of new technologies to communicate the Gospel. For Lutherans during the Reformation, the relatively new printing press supplied a means to publish Luther's works and other theological writings that addressed biblical views of justification and related issues of the day.[1] LCMS pastor and professor Walter A. Maier, speaker of *The Lutheran Hour* from 1930 to 1950, became a household name for his powerful preaching of the Gospel via radio, and his ministry touched many lives for Christ and influenced generations of preachers to follow.[2] The Missouri Synod even began a television ministry that notably won an Emmy in 1980 for religious programming.[3] None of these were seen as compromising the ministry or worship of the church, but rather as opportunities for proclaiming God's Word to those who might otherwise not hear it. With respect to digital technologies, our congregations have long had an internet presence, even if they were not livestreaming worship services every Sunday. The question was never *if* we should use such technologies.

The great question facing the church in an age of rapid technological change is *how* it should use these technologies in a way that supports rather than detracts from our understanding of its mission and ministry. Technology, as many like to say, is not neutral, and from a Christian perspective that is because sinful humans use technology. We overuse it, use it for sinful purposes, use it in ways that detract from the good things God has given us. Churches, families and society more generally may use technology to their detriment when that technology draws us away from contact with fellow humans created in the image of God; tempts us to seek solace in isolation from others or through digital means; or tricks us into believing artificial intelligence is a replacement for human contact, human learning or human wisdom. We dare not discourage the wise use of technology, which is already a necessary part of the fabric of human life. There is no "going back." Yet we also must urge the cautious, morally responsible and theologically alert use of technology in a way that reflects what we know from Holy Scripture about who we are, how God has made us, how God seeks to save us in Christ, and how God has ordered and directed His church to confess its faith and share its life together.

In this brief document, the Commission wishes to present five different applications of online technologies within the church and her ministry — livestreamed worship services, virtual multi-parish arrangements, online reproof and church discipline, online-only congregational membership, and artificial intelligence-based sermons — for evaluation and discussion. In each case, these practices have emerged in recent years, received attention within the Synod, and been adopted or become the subject of controversy for our congregations. This document will assess the positives and negatives of each from a decidedly theological basis (as they relate to not only the doctrine we confess, but also the agreement in certain practices that those doctrines imply). It will also recommend where these online technologies may be helpfully incorporated into the church's life in a way that furthers the shared faith and life we have together, as well as where

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[1] See, for instance, Mark Edwards Jr., *Printing, Propaganda, and Martin Luther* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1994), or Andrew Pettegree, *Brand Luther: 1517, Printing and the Making of the Reformation* (New York: Penguin Press, 2015).

[2] Kirk Farney, *Ministers of a New Medium: Broadcasting Theology in the Radio Ministries of Fulton J. Sheen and Walter A. Maier* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2022), and Paul L. Maier, *A Man Spoke, A World Listened: The Story of Walter A. Maier and the Lutheran Hour* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1963).

[3] Ardon Albrecht, *Lutheran Television: Glory Years* (St. Louis: The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, 2018).

they may problematize that shared faith and life. The Commission does not offer its opinion on these matters on a technological basis, nor does it necessarily weigh in on the larger cultural, social, ethical and bioethical concerns that these technologies raise. Those matters may be the subject of further study based upon the feedback received to this document, as the Commission considers a broader discussion of online technology and how the church should respond to it.

1. Livestreamed Worship Services

Due to church closures during the Covid-19 pandemic, many congregations began to broadcast their live services online using streaming technology. For some, this has raised questions about whether streaming services could potentially lead to privacy concerns, whether they might induce people to no longer gather together in a local congregation for worship with fellow believers, or even whether congregations or pastors might use online services to induce members of other congregations to join and support theirs. Should LCMS congregations be encouraged to use livestreamed online worship services alongside of — or as alternatives to — their local, in-person gatherings?

Our churches have actively participated in online media for decades. Since the World Wide Web went online in the 1990s, Missouri Synod congregations — like so many others around the world — have increasingly adopted technological means of reaching out and making their faith and ministries known. For years, email prayer chains, downloadable MP3 sermons and recorded services were the primary ways congregations used digital means as part of their work. Congregational websites have become ubiquitous. Churches operate social media pages now to promote events, share Scripture passages or church news, and celebrate milestones from the church's life together (confirmations, weddings, baptisms, etc.). All of these are examples of extending the shared experiences of that congregation to others through digital means. These raise few serious concerns or engender little controversy. Other practices, like livestreaming services, are more complicated.

On a theological level, internet technologies like livestreaming provide the congregations of the Synod a tangible, accessible way to do what Christ has called them to do: proclaim the Word (Luke 24:44–47; Acts 8:1–4). Whether spoken in open-air preaching, as by the apostles of the New Testament church; preached in pulpits of European cathedrals or A-frame American churches; signed by those ministering to the deaf and hearing-impaired; or, yes, mediated through fiber-optic cables, the Word is able to create and sustain saving faith in the hearts of those who hear it, for the Holy Spirit is at work through that Word (Rom. 10:14–17; Augsburg Confession 5). Online services can be used profitably to communicate that Word to all people: to the sick, hospitalized or homebound, whom the pastor may be unable to reach; to the wandering, erring or unbelieving, who are unwilling to step foot in a church; to those under political regimes where Christianity is forbidden and the gathering of Christians for worship prohibited.

There are also legitimate hesitations on the part of many congregations. As noted above, privacy concerns may result from the advance of facial recognition software that those averse to Christianity could use to target Christians, especially children. Certain preachers or congregations among us may use online services irresponsibly, in such a way as to recruit members of other Synod congregations or to promote ideas that violate the Eighth

Commandment in our midst — though we hope that collegiality and mutual trust would prevail between fellow laborers in Christ's harvest. The burden of digital infrastructure, upkeep and delivery may detract from or unnecessarily influence the pastor's preaching, the congregation's style of public worship, or even the gathered believers' active participation in the life of the local congregation (for instance, one may opt for viewing services online rather than attending in person). Might a preacher change his sermon content if he believes the sermon will be heard more broadly than simply by the hearers in his congregation? Might a congregation be tempted to make its worship more acceptable to others viewing online (whether more liturgical or less liturgical)? Should communicants be shown receiving the Sacrament of the Altar, or might the prospect that one could be viewed online impact the way that he or she receives the Sacrament, or even *whether* he or she does? These are genuine concerns that must be considered by each and every congregation.

The primary theological objection to the presence of online services is that they could tempt congregants to simply view those services online rather than attend them at their local congregation. It must be said that online services are no replacement for the local gathering of believers. *Lutheran Hour* speaker Walter Maier directed his hearers to a local congregation and did not consider his program a replacement for it. The church has always gathered locally in congregations to hear the Word, receive the Sacrament and be strengthened in its faith together as Christians in need of a respite from the attacks of the devil, the world and their sinful natures. The congregation does not exist for corporate weekly worship services alone — though, sadly, some Christians live as though it does. In the gathering or assembly of believers (as Augsburg Confession 7–8 describes the church), Christians are to build up one another in the faith by exercising the gifts God has given them (Rom. 12; 1 Cor. 12:4–21; 1 Cor. 14:1–13). They are to support one another personally with encouragement, consolation and conversation, even with gifts to meet the physical needs among them (Acts 2; Smalcald Articles III 4). They are to protect one another from sin through reproof and correction (Heb. 10:24–25; 1 Cor. 5). This goes well beyond solitary worship services into the common life they share together as a congregation. Moreover, it simply cannot happen to a full degree behind the relative anonymity of online participation.

Finally, while the Word may be preached profitably and to the end of salvation through online services — and other digital means — the Lord's Supper itself is reserved for the locally gathered congregation. There, the body and blood of Jesus Christ is present for believers to receive with their mouths for the forgiveness of sins, according to Christ's Word. There, the Word of Christ is proclaimed, and the believers can be confident that the Sacrament consecrated, distributed and received is the true body and blood of Christ. There, the presiding pastor ensures that communicants are rightly instructed in the faith, that open and unrepentant sinners and heretics are denied the Sacrament, and that the Sacrament is administered according to our Lord's Words, to the benefit of those who receive it in faith.

For these reasons, the Commission encourages the use of online services as instruments to proclaim the Gospel, yet it urges caution and care in doing so. Online services should not be used in a way that sows division within our fellowship, exposes parishioners (particularly children) to certain online predatory risks, replaces or makes negligible the local gathering of Christians in fellowship and worship, or uses any means of participating in the Lord's Supper virtually.

2. Virtual Multi-Parish Arrangements ("Video Venue")

In part due to the growing pastoral shortage within The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, there has been conversation about whether a single pastor could service multiple congregations virtually. That is, rather than the traditional arrangement of a multipoint parish, where a pastor would conduct in-person services at two or more congregations at different times, conducting services virtually means the ordained pastor would preach in one congregation and his sermon would be streamed live at the other congregation(s). Also known as "video venue" ministry, the rest of the service at other sites would be officiated by a layman, with the exception of the Lord's Supper.

The practice of multi-parish arrangements is not new to the Missouri Synod. Planting churches and ministering to churches that cannot afford a pastor have often taken place by way of an ordained minister serving multiple congregations at a time. In a certain sense, virtual multi-parish or video-venue arrangements are a technologically mediated way of carrying out such ministries. Rather than having a congregation or church plant hold services at odd hours or on unconventional days, or the parish pastor traversing snow-covered roads or traveling long distances, the use of virtually delivered services (preferably synchronously) means a congregation otherwise unable to afford a pastor would have the benefit of doctrinally sound preaching from a rostered, ordained and preferably called minister.

There is clearly a need for the Synod — while remaining theologically faithful to Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions — to be adaptable in how it provides pastoral care for congregations that cannot procure pastoral service. In its recent *Mission and Ministry Principles and Practical Observations and Suggestions,* the CTCR specifically proposed extending the service of the Synod's ordained ministers, including the arrangement of more multipoint parish ministries.[4] A virtual multi-parish arrangement might be an example of that. As noted elsewhere in this document, the Word itself can be faithfully and profitably communicated through virtual means. The Spirit works through the oral Word (Rom. 10:14–17; Augsburg Confession 5) but is not restricted to an oral Word declared in the confines of a church building. That digitally proclaimed Word is also capable of mediating the faith-giving work of the Spirit.

Such an arrangement could obviously not include the Lord's Supper.[5] The pastor would have to make other provisions for the administration of the Lord's Supper under the care of an ordained minister. Arrangements would also have to be made for pastoral care at the virtual sites — ideally, though not necessarily in every case, by the ordained minister — including visitation of the sick and the homebound, confirmation instruction, funerals, preparation for and officiating of weddings, preparation for and administration of baptisms, and so on. Moreover, the conduct of

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[4] Commission on Theology and Church Relations, *Mission and Ministry Principles and Practical Observations and Suggestions* (St. Louis: The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, 2024), *www.lcms.org/ctcr-observations-and-suggestions.*

[5] On the LCMS response to the practice of online Communion during the Covid-19 pandemic, see 2023 Resolution 5-08A ("To Affirm In-Person Communion"), as well as opinions by the CTCR, *Communion and Covid-19* (2020), *www.lcms.org/ctcr-communion-and-covid,* and *One Little Word Can Fell Him: Addendum to Communion and Covid-19* (2020), *www.lcms.org/ctcr-communion-and-covid-addendum.*

services by a layman in place of a pastor is no intrinsic obstacle. Specific guidelines for that practice were laid out by the CTCR in order to prevent confusion with the pastoral office.[6]

There are also reasonable objections to this practice. In the first place, there may be confusion about who is responsible for oversight in the congregation. Theologically speaking, the Synod has understood the oversight (from the Greek *episkopos* in the New Testament, e.g., Phil. 1:1; 1 Tim. 3:2; Titus 1:7, among others) by pastors to be a ministry conferred on him by his call to a given congregation. He exercises that ministry through his preaching of the Word, administration of the Sacraments and pastoral care among his flock. While we have the example of vacancy pastors, for instance, who serve a congregation without a "call" per se, a pastor exercising this ministry of oversight through preaching, Sacraments and pastoral care ordinarily requires a call, especially for any extended length of time.

Second, and more pertinently, the ministry of a pastor is not simply one of preaching or communicating content or data. The pastor is charged with pastoral care, and that pastoral care entails things such as instruction (not just in a sermon, but individually and in other groups), private counsel and spiritual nurture of all those in his flock. Part of that pastoral care includes chance conversations that arise in the course of routine church tasks. In an important sense, a pastor's faith and life in general as lived in the presence of his flock are to be an example to the believer (1 Tim. 4:12; see also 1 Cor. 11:1; Heb. 13:7). While Lutherans have long valued the preaching of the Word as the principal task of the pastoral office, the pastoral office must not be reduced to congregational preaching. Nor should the called and ordained minister delegate all other (or even most) aspects of his pastoral responsibilities besides preaching to another. If he is called to more than one parish, the pastor must provide care as responsibly as possible to all those entrusted to him, so far as that is within his power to do.

Finally, given these concerns, it is hard to see how virtual multipoint parishes are preferable to the traditional model. In the case of severe weather conditions or other immediate challenges that would preclude the presence of a pastor in other congregations he serves, a video alternative may be possible. However, such a scenario does not necessitate the permanent arrangement of a virtual multipoint parish ministry. Under exceptional circumstances, the CTCR has encouraged the option of a layman reading a sermon written by the pastor.[7] If the changing of service times is considered a burden to the congregation, the CTCR has urged flexibility when it comes to times and days in order to facilitate regular preaching, administration of the Sacrament and pastoral care from an available ordained minister.[8] Moreover, the opportunity to receive the Lord's Supper with some degree of regularity (not to mention corporate or individual absolution, as well as other pastoral acts) makes the traditional model of multipoint parish ministry a less problematic option than its virtual alternative.

While virtual video arrangements may be used in emergencies or in hybrid arrangements, such as alternating weekly services (where one is in-person, the other not), the Commission believes the

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[6] Commission on Theology and Church Relations, *Opinion on Lay Reading of Sermons and Conduct of Worship in the Absence of a Pastor* (2023), *www.lcms.org/ctcr-absence-of-a-pastor*.
[7] CTCR, *Opinion on Lay Reading of Sermons.*
[8] CTCR, *Mission and Ministry Principles,* and *Opinion on Lay Reading of Sermons,* 6.

practice creates more obstacles than it removes. Under ordinary circumstances, it would urge traditional multipoint parish ministry.

3. Online Reproof and Church Discipline

In recent decades, social media has become a new public space for conversation, debate and the airing of concerns. This has not gone without impact on the church and how it handles personal reproof, church discipline and other matters pertaining to the resolution of disagreements. For Christians both inside the Missouri Synod and in other churches, it has become common to publicly identify errors of doctrine or practice, call upon those with administrative or oversight responsibilities to address these errors, and even interject oneself into the process by commenting on matters of church discipline. Should members of our congregations, and particularly church workers who are members of the Synod, use the internet (specifically social media) to engage in accusations, reproof or other forms of church discipline ordinarily reserved for private, congregational, district or Synod mediation?

It is inevitable that those who use social media as a primary means of communication would take to social media to discuss matters of importance for the faith and life of their church. Concern for right doctrine and practice has been a hallmark of the Missouri Synod since its founding. That concern is laudable and should not be disregarded because of the particular means one may use to express that concern. Indeed, there has long been a precedent for addressing certain sins in a public way, provided those sins are known publicly. Martin Luther himself said that it was not a violation of the Eighth Commandment to call attention to a public sin. In the Large Catechism, he spoke of it this way: "But where the sin is so public that the judge and everyone else are aware of it, you can without sin shun and avoid those who have brought disgrace upon themselves, and you may also testify publicly against them" (LC I 284).

In an age when social media has become a "digital commons" for discussing social, political and theological matters, we should expect that one's opinions expressed online may be regarded as public statements of their faith, especially in the case of pastors. It is also true that services, sermons and other congregational acts formerly not known outside of those involved are now broadcast online and available to anyone who wishes to find them, thus making them "public" in a sense. Where any of the above exhibit doctrine or practices that are contrary to Scripture, the Lutheran Confessions or the doctrinal positions of the Synod, then it is entirely understandable for someone to take to online media to identify errors, express concern, and even solicit the Synod and its members to condemn such errors.

That said, there are any number of problems with this practice. First, these online statements, services and so on may not be intended for broader, public consumption. While this does not excuse the error, it does mean that we should not assume the offending party is making a public declaration of faith or committing a public sin. As the CTCR said concerning "public sin" in 2006: "When Luther speaks about *public* sins, we might better translate 'public' as *notorious* or *scandalous.* In other words, it is not simply a matter of a sinful action that is known to some other person or a few other people. All of sixteenth century life was public in that sense. The situation Luther envisioned was a sin so widely known that it could no longer be covered without

scandalizing the community. But the publicity would also end with that community."[9] In fact, that report argues, making public accusations of a perceived sin not known widely may serve the exact opposite purpose: "The rebuke has the side effect of publicizing the sin more widely, of making it known to an audience that had no prior knowledge of it."[10] In such cases, it would be far preferable to address these errors personally and privately rather than publicly and online, following Matthew 18. Through personal, private reproach, one may find that the error was unintentional and the individual repentant, or possibly that the offending issue was misunderstood or easily explainable.

Second, in the case of legitimate error in doctrine or practice, the Synod has adopted very specific procedures for addressing such offenses. All members of the Synod in any capacity — elected officers, faculty, church workers, congregations — submit themselves to ecclesiastical supervision. Concerns regarding false teaching or practice should be directed first to the individual (in keeping with Matthew 18), then to the appropriate ecclesiastical supervisor. The ecclesiastical supervisor is entrusted with the oversight of those under his care, and therefore concerns should be raised with the supervisor privately rather than broached publicly, especially online. The Bylaws of the Synod provide for a dispute resolution process, which covers theological, doctrinal and ecclesiastical matters, including the appeal of excommunication or specific call-related disputes (Bylaw 1.10). There are specific Bylaws addressing the expulsion of congregations and individual members (ordained or commissioned), officers of the Synod, and those guilty of sexual or criminal misconduct (2.14-2.17). The Bylaws also allow for appeals to the certification of materials by doctrinal review (3.9.3.2). In nearly all cases, confidentiality is required to allow time for fraternal correction and repentance without calling attention to the dispute publicly, as well as to ensure unbiased review or the possibility of selecting unbiased panelists to consider appeals. Likewise, "circularizing" (or attempting to sway opinion) of the Synod on these matters may be expressly prohibited in certain cases (3.9.3.2.2[d]). By publicizing accusations or opinions on matters mediated through one of these processes, the confidentiality necessary may be unintentionally eroded and the ability to resolve or appeal these cases compromised. Moreover, since the purpose of these various bylaws and procedures is to bring about reconciliation through biblically based reproach and repentance, intervening in, publicizing or politicizing conflicts may have the opposite effect of inhibiting such fraternal conversations and resolution.

Finally, what may be appropriate for online debate in a secular world is not necessarily appropriate in the church. We should not treat internal theological or ecclesiastical concerns as reasons for public dissension that compromises our witness to the world. St. Paul makes this point clear in 1 Corinthians, when condemning Christians who bring accusations against one another in the civil courts of his day: "So if you have such cases, why do you lay them before those who have no standing in the church? I say this to your shame. Can it be that there is no one among you wise enough to settle a dispute between the brothers, but brother goes to law against

[9] Commission on Theology and Church Relations, *Public Rebuke of Public Sin: Considerations in Light of the Large Catechism Explanation of the Eighth Commandment* (St. Louis: The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, 2006), 21, *www.lcms.org/ctcr-public-rebuke-of-public-sin.*
[10] CTCR, *Public Rebuke of Public Sin,* 23.

brother, and that before unbelievers?" (1 Cor. 6:4–6).[11] In its 2019 report on social media, the CTCR underscored this point: "Even as they attempt to proclaim Christ, believers may undermine the good news of salvation by causing (or supporting) division or conflict in their online conversations with fellow believers or with unbelievers."[12]

The Commission believes that, while the line between public and private has undoubtedly been blurred due to digital media, Lutherans — and especially members of the Synod — should refrain from engaging in online public reproof or online comment on matters of church discipline, particularly on social media. These are best reserved for private, personal conversation and for the processes established by our commonly agreed upon bylaws that regulate church discipline in our midst.

4. Online-Only Membership

With the expanded use of online technology by congregations, specifically in the form of livestreamed services, there is a greater possibility of members joining a congregation and participating solely online. The most obvious and potentially controversial or divisive form of this might occur if an LCMS parishioner in one locality were to watch the online services of a congregation located somewhere geographically that would prevent them from attending worship in person, then ask to join that congregation. Should LCMS congregations accept into their membership those who do not reside in a proximate geographical area and cannot (or do not intend to) join the new congregation for in-person worship or to actively participate in the life of that local congregation?

Missouri Synod congregations have often dealt with this dilemma when it comes to members of a congregation that do not reside locally. It may be a college student, an elderly person who has moved to a care facility or a member who has simply moved to another town. For any number of reasons, the person has chosen to retain membership at the home congregation. If it is a temporary — or potentially temporary — move, congregations will ordinarily keep them on the rolls but urge them to attend worship or procure pastoral care in the interim. In the event of a more permanent situation, pastors will advise them to visit a local congregation and speak to a pastor there about transferring their membership.

However, there are closer similarities to holding membership in a congregation that one does not or cannot attend. For instance, many LCMS congregations have a practice of "guest membership," especially in the case of those who may live part of the year in one locale and part of the year in another, for reasons of weather or family. In these cases, the parishioner wishes to be an active member of an additional congregation, possibly with voting rights in both

[11] On this concern and its implications for the Gospel, see Christian Preus, "Suing Your Brother: 1 Corinthians 6:1–9 in the Lutheran Exegetical Tradition," *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 86 (2022): 257–278. Also note Commission on Theology and Church Relations, *1 Corinthians 6:1-11: An Exegetical Study* (St. Louis: The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, 1991), *www.lcms.org/ctcr-1-corinthians-6-1-11-exegetical-study.*

[12] Commission on Theology and Church Relations, *A Snapshot of Trending Tools: Christians and Social Media* (St. Louis: The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, 2019), 28, *www.lcms.org/ctcr-christians-and-social-media.*

congregational assemblies.[13] Similarly, the homebound who lack the physical ability to attend services without great assistance retain membership in that congregation, despite the likelihood of never stepping foot inside the church building again for corporate worship.

In the case of online-only membership, there are some important differences to bear in mind. One is the availability of pastoral care. The homebound may be unable to attend worship at a local congregation, but pastors will routinely visit them to share the Word, pray and offer the Lord's Supper. If a parishioner from Baltimore were to join a congregation in Chicago, for instance, that would not be possible. The Chicago pastor could not reasonably visit the Baltimore parishioner. Likewise, there will be a limit to the pastor's ability to get to know the parishioner, to be with the parishioner in the event of a spiritual or personal crisis, or to be available to officiate the parishioner's funeral. Caring for the souls of one's flock is a fundamental part of Lutheran pastoral ministry and a reason why that pastoral ministry has long been referred to as "soul-care" (from the German *Seelsorge*). To simply be unable to provide that care for reasons of geographical proximity would unnecessarily detract from the very calling and responsibility of the pastoral office — all the more unnecessarily if there is a pastor in that locality who can provide such pastoral care.

The same is true for other elements of the local congregation's life. If one were to be a non-local member of a congregation who only participates online, there would be precious little opportunity to establish and build relationships. As noted above, the congregation does not exist solely to conduct worship services. The members of the church who gather together offer mutual instruction, encouragement, consolation and admonition. The ability to develop relationships where that might happen — in conjunction with a worship service or apart from it — would be severely hampered, and any resulting fellowship limited to digital communication itself. Moreover, since our churches reject the practice of online Communion as inconsistent with our Lord's institution of the Supper and its intended use, online members would be unable to receive the Lord's Supper at their congregation of membership, or from the pastor of that congregation. One wonders how, in this event, we can even speak of the communion or fellowship (*koinonia*) expressed at the table by virtue of our shared reception of the Lord's Supper (1 Cor. 10:14–22; 1 Cor. 11:17–34). There would be no shared participation at the Lord's table or shared partaking of Christ's body and blood with the fellow members of one's own congregation.

While there may conceivably be exceptional circumstances under which one participates in a ministry of a local congregation, despite only being able to do so online, the Commission urges against online membership. Pastors who receive queries about online membership would do well to inquire about the reasons for interest in such membership and, if not local, direct the interested individuals to a congregation close to them where they might attend and potentially join.

5. Artificial Intelligence-Generated Sermons

In 2022, ChatGPT-4 was made available to the public. This generative artificial intelligence platform enabled anyone to draft full texts using a simple online prompt. It quickly became a

[13] 1989 Resolution 5-19 ("To Provide for Guest Membership") urged congregations to allow for guest memberships that may entail, among other things, "attendance and participation in voters' assemblies as advisory or associate members" (1989 *Proceedings,* 139).

cultural phenomenon, impacting not only education, academic research, journalism and other writing-related professions, but also preaching. Pastors could now submit a simple query on the text for their sermon, and ChatGPT — using large language models that draw content from everything accessible to it online — could draft full text sermons, literally in seconds. One can even specify that the sermon be "Lutheran" or "LCMS," and the generator will provide theologically and denominationally specific versions. Should Missouri Synod pastors use generative AI to write (or assist in writing) sermons?

At first glance, it may seem highly implausible that Missouri Synod pastors, who have received substantial training in preaching — not to mention the theological disciplines that inform their preaching — would make use of potentially controversial technology such as artificial intelligence. However, several points should be taken into consideration. First, we must ask whether or not an AI text generator is capable of producing a theologically correct Lutheran sermon. It is conceivable that large language models, when trained with actual LCMS sermons and other Lutheran literature, may generate sermon texts that would essentially reflect the theology already preached in our pulpits and written in our publications. One might even say, in that case, that it is modestly *more likely* to avoid serious theological error, since any such serious theological error would have to be widespread within existing LCMS sermons and publications.

The question is less the theological correctness of a sermon (which one hopes any Missouri Synod pastor would review before preaching), but whether or not it is appropriate to preach a sermon that the pastor himself did not write. On that score, it might also be said that there is precedent for preaching sermons — or at least *adapting* sermons — drafted by someone else. For instance, Martin Luther published two different series of "postils" — essentially model sermons that could be read devotionally, but also used as inspiration for a sermon writer, adapted for his own preaching or, in a pinch, preached largely as his own.[14] In our day, it is not unheard of for LCMS preachers on a special occasion (for instance, on a Holy Week, Lenten or Christmas Eve service) to read a short sermon from a Luther work or a church father in place of his own sermon.

Granting these concessions, however, the Commission believes there are important reasons to discourage the practice of using AI-generated sermons. First, pastors are not called simply to deliver ideas. Their sermons are exercises in pastoral care. They should know their flocks and preach to them. They do not simply read sermons written by others, or sections of a commentary or pages from a devotional. Their "aptness" for preaching (1 Tim. 3:2; 2 Tim. 2:24) involves not only their knowledge of doctrinal content, but their ability to explain it in a way that their people can understand and affirm, in a way that personally calls them to repentance and persuasively delivers the Gospel to be received in faith. A Lutheran sermon — like a Lutheran pastor — is not replaceable with doctrinally correct data. The pastor must take that theological truth and deliver it to the people God has given him to serve in a way personalized to them and the challenges and trials they face. No sermon will be exactly the same, whether preached to a different congregation or preached at a different time in a pastor's ministry. Pastors will preach the same biblical passages in different ways based upon the believers they are called to serve at any given time.

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[14] "In 1526 Luther suggested that less-capable preachers could occasionally recite one of his postils as their sermon, though in 1543 he did not want preachers to use postils as a crutch for their own laziness," *Luther's Works* 75: xxiv.

Second, Lutheran pastors are trained not simply to be communicators of the distinction between Law and Gospel, but to be practitioners of Law and Gospel. That is, they are to know how to judiciously and sensitively, yet adroitly and intentionally, apply the Law and the Gospel in ways pertinent to the congregants they serve. There is no single formula for or balance of how much Law and how much Gospel should be in a sermon. Where Law is clearly present in a text of Scripture, the pastor is to apply that to the congregation in a way that addresses them and the sins prevalent in their midst or in their community or in their culture at large. Where Gospel is clearly present in a text of Scripture, the pastor is to apply that to the specific personal, spiritual or communal needs and threats of conscience those parishioners feel. As C.F.W. Walther wrote in his third thesis on Law and Gospel, "Rightly distinguishing the Law and the Gospel is the most difficult and the highest art of Christians in general and of theologians in particular. It is taught only by the Holy Spirit in the school of experience."[15]

Finally, by preaching sermons drafted using artificial intelligence, a pastor unnecessarily creates doubts about his theological competence and ability to write sermons that meet the needs of the people he is called to serve. Scripture urges pastors time and again to shepherd their flocks by protecting them against false teaching and guiding them to correct doctrine (e.g., Eph. 4:1–16; 2 Tim. 2:14–26). Pastors are trained theologically and homiletically to write and deliver sermons, and the abdication of that responsibility to a text-generator — no matter how doctrinally correct the generated sermon may be — potentially creates suspicion that the pastor will not be able to identify false teaching and guide his flock to correct doctrine. That is a risk not worth taking.

While the critical use of artificial intelligence in developing sermons (outlines, illustrations, cross references, etc.) may be of limited help in sermon research, the Commission strongly urges against Synod pastors preaching sermons generated using this technology.

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[15] C.F.W. Walther, *The Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel,* trans. W.H.T. Dau (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1986), 42. By "theologian," Walther — himself a seminary professor — has in mind the preacher. The seventh lecture (in explanation of thesis 3) repeatedly makes this clear, 50–58.