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The Church is not the end itself. She is placed in a world and community and there becomes God's instrument into which outsiders are invited and welcomed. And the pastor is accountable to the Lord Himself for upholding that divine prerogative of reaching out to others so that through teaching and preaching about it and demonstrating it in practice, the members will be motivated to participate in their own respective ways.

## For the Life of the World

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*For the Life of the World* is mailed to all pastors and congregations of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod in the United States and Canada and to anyone interested in the work of Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne, Indiana.

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

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# Why Your Congregation Is More Important Than Ever

Dale A. Meyer



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

The congregation where you worship has always been important. It's the place where the faithful gather around God's Word and Sacraments. As eternally important as that is, changes in American life make our weekly gatherings at church more important than ever. If you're concerned about the challenges facing your congregation in these changed times, remember our hope is Jesus, the Lord of the Church. We need to trust He's leading us.



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**In our impersonal 21st century, your congregation has a more important role than ever. Your church is a place where people can come together, receive the nurture of Word and Sacrament, and learn through faithful and relevant Law/Gospel preaching, teaching, and conversation how to go out into the impersonal world as people loved by God and by one another.**

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**Previous page:** *The Rev. Tyrel Bramwell preaching at St. Mark's Evangelical Lutheran Church in Ferndale, California.*

**Above:** *Immanuel Lutheran Church, Murphysboro, Illinois, enjoying a fellowship dinner together.*

**Opposite page:** *The Rev. Matthew Wietfeldt distributes the Sacrament during chapel at Concordia Theological Seminary.*

I've been privileged to travel and preach throughout The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod for over three decades. For some years now I've seen and heard older church members grieving what's been lost in our American culture and specifically in the life of their congregations. Those of us who are older grew up in "Christian" America. Public morality was Judeo-Christian, the Ten Commandments often seen in public places. Most of our neighbors were church members who attended with some regularity. No sports on Sunday mornings! People back then had some knowledge of the Bible, its main stories and especially Jesus. To be sure, not everyone sincerely believed in Jesus and the Bible, but public life was not at odds with the message and practices of the Church. When I graduated from Lutheran grade school and went into a public high school, the two environments were different but still complementary. That "Christian" America is gone and not about to return.

One reason is Americans have changed how they look at government. The Declaration of Independence says "All men...are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights." The founders believed the Creator, not government, gives individuals their rights. And so they crafted the

Constitution knowing that individuals will pursue their rights, their self-interest, and often do so by joining with like-minded people. The founders also recognized that government and whatever partisan group happens to be in the majority will likewise pursue their own interests. A realistic view of human nature! In 1788, James Madison wrote in Federalist Paper No. 51,

If men were angels, no government would be necessary. If angels were to govern men, neither external nor internal controls on government would be necessary. In framing a government which is to be administered by men over men, the great difficulty lies in this: you must first enable the government to control the governed; and in the next place oblige it to control itself.

In the 19th century, another way of looking at government began to arise. Beginning with European philosophers and then championed by American intellectuals and politicians, this new way, "Progressivism," advocated a less limited and more dominating role for government. In the severe times of the Great Depression, President Franklin Roosevelt led a great expansion of governmental power in the lives of individuals. That increased immensely during President Lyndon Johnson's "Great Society." Big government indeed does some good things, maintaining the military and Social Security being two examples, but today Americans are conditioned to look to government for our rights (think about our litigious society) and take care of our needs (think about entitlements).

As limited government has given way to ever bigger government, the individual self-interest the realistic founders recognized has become almost unrestrained. "You have your opinion; I have mine. Who are you to tell me that I'm wrong?" It leaves you, me, and others in our communities trying to cope in an increasingly uncaring society. Hyper-individualists don't care about others, and government is so big and powerful that it's impersonal. What's to become

of me? The challenges of living in this impersonal society are far greater than in 20th century, “Christian” America.

Across the street from our home in Collinsville, Illinois, sits the American Legion. It is a “mediating institution,” a place where individuals can gather to enjoy one another’s company and share perspectives on life in our larger society. Civic clubs and municipal governments are also mediating institutions, and so is your family and your congregation. Over the decades, “go it alone” hyper-individualism and unrealistic dependence upon government to take care of us has weakened mediating institutions. You can see it in the decline in church membership and weekly attendance.

Yet who’s Lord of the Church? Let us not grieve like people who have no hope! In our impersonal 21st century, your congregation has a more important role than ever. Your church is a place where people can come together, receive the nurture of Word and Sacrament, and learn through faithful and relevant Law/Gospel preaching, teaching, and conversation how to go out into the impersonal world as people loved by God and by one another. This is an invigorating mission opportunity for our times.

When one of our professors said our new residential curriculum was theology for the 21st century, he got pushback. “What was wrong with the theology of the 20th century?” Nothing, save that in the last century people generally believed in God; today, more and more people don’t and many who claim they do are in fact virtual atheists. God’s Word and Luther’s teaching shall to all time endure, but how do we apply those teachings evangelically to today’s Pandora box of challenges? Atheism and agnosticism rising, gender and sexual issues increasing, almost unrestrained immorality, uncivil public discourse, social media, and so many other contemporary challenges that were not known or flaunted in “Christian” America now swirl around us all. How’s a person to cope?

No doubt about it, these are challenging times, but with confidence in the Spirit of Christ at work here-and-now through the Means of Grace, these are

invigorating times for your congregation to be God’s mediating institution, showing people how to navigate impersonal society with the love of the Body of Christ. “Who is the man who fears the Lord? Him will he instruct in the way that he should choose. His soul shall abide in well-being” (Psalm 25:12-13). And when we go out every Monday into our workaday world, take our hits, get our griefs, we have more motivation to gather again with like-minded believers in the Body of Christ, to have our faith in God and our life in Church validated. “When the cares of my heart are many, your consolations cheer my soul” (Psalm 94:19). We are then fueled with new hope to go back into our neighborhoods and communities as witnesses. What a mission!

The ultimate soul-forming institutions in a free society are frequently religious institutions. Traditional religion offers a direct challenge to the ethic of the age of fracture. Religious commitments command us to a mixture of responsibility, sympathy, lawfulness, and righteousness that align our wants with our duties. They help form us to be free.

(Yuval Levin,  
*The Fractured Republic*, 204)

“Christian” America is gone, and that’s not all bad. In today’s challenging times for the Church, we learn anew or for the first time that faith means we’re staking our lives on Jesus Christ. He’s your personal hope and He’s the hope of your congregation for these challenging times. God’s people have always gathered around the Word and Sacraments of Christ—as important today as ever—but in post-churched America there are new reasons that energize your congregation’s gathering and mission. It’s a great time to be the Church!! 🏰

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