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The Lutheran Educator



The WELS Education Journal



*she gave birth
to her firstborn,
a son.*

The Lutheran Educator

The education journal
of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod
edited by faculty of Martin Luther College

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Convergence and divergence

Ever notice how sometimes people from the north will adopt a drawl while they are talking to people from the South? Ever had a summer job with co-workers who used foul language so that you had to make a concerted effort not to do the same? In 1991, researchers Giles and Coupland called this kind of adaptation or the lack of it the *communication accommodation theory*. Matching our partners' language patterns (pitch, rate, vocabulary and others) is called convergence. Speaking differently is called divergence.

Convergence can be a way to connect with partners and gain their confidence. It can also come off as insincere and condescending. Divergence can be a way we establish principles and create distinction. It can also come off as arrogant and out of touch.

Perhaps useful is asking ourselves what kind of language our schools are using. If we think of the communities into which we have been planted as our "conversational partners," we do well to learn just what "vocabulary" they are using. Many parents have expectations of schools, and it shows up in the phrases they use like "curriculum alignment," "professional growth" and "accreditation" to name a few. Using the vocabulary, and, of course, practicing it, is one way we create convergence with a positive outcome.

But if ever there is a time to practice divergence in our schools is it not the Christmas season? While the community embraces the "Winter holiday," extends "season's greetings," and jingles sleigh bells, we speak a different language. Our schools exist to proclaim Jesus Christ—his incarnation, his ministry, his sacrificial death, his triumphant resurrection, his glorious ascension. Christmas is Jesus' obedient entrance into humanity so that his loving Father's plan of salvation might be executed. He took on flesh not just to teach us but to save us from our sins and the eternal condemnation we deserve.

Our relationship with Jesus defines us and his centrality in our schools is not a truth to be masked or blunted by giving anyone else equal time. Arguably, Jesus' place in our schools should be evident at any time of year, but with an increasing number of traditions clamoring to be recognized in December, may we be confident and joyful in practicing divergence. Let no one connected with our schools be confused about what we are celebrating.

Contemplating this tension between convergence and divergence as we operate our schools and present ourselves to the community is valuable and is yet another way of framing an ongoing challenge: meeting the perceived needs of those in our mission field without masking our mission.

PML

One Hundred Days — A Glimpse of Eternity?!

Mark Zarling

“I wonder what he means with that title.”

After the proverbial 100 days in a new job, I can only say that it has been a glimpse of eternity! Not that this ministry is an endless treadmill of administrative minutiae; that would indeed be like time without end for me—and maybe for you too. No, what I mean is that, in the last three months of my earthly pilgrimage, God has given me a preview of heavenly realities. He’s given me a glimpse of heaven here on earth at Martin Luther College. Alumni and students alike might question such a comparison, but let’s consider it: **a preview of glory in the people, the purpose, and the place called MLC.**

The people

What—there are no sinners at MLC? Of course there are. Yet a Christian lives by faith and not by sight. When we look at each other with the eyes of Spirit-given faith, we see remarkable fruits of faith everywhere.

Not too long ago I asked a transfer student, a young lady who had attended two other universities, to compare MLC with the other colleges. Her first com-

ment was simple yet profound. “People here are friendly. They look at you and smile at you in the hall, even if they don’t know your name.”

I believe that the gospel has touched hearts on this campus and the Spirit has instilled in us a life-changing truth: The MLC family is part of the family of God. The professors—like those of you who lead in God’s kingdom—know that soon the Christian students entrusted to them will be united with them for eternity in the body of Christ. Each person on campus lives with the subconscious reality that we are united through faith in Jesus and we will live together forever. Doesn’t that realization inspire a passion for souls and a love for each member of the body of Christ? Is that not a glimpse of heaven even in the visible gathering of Christians on earth?

The purpose

We are not only united. We are also unique—distinctive individuals with a wide range of gifts from God, all dedicated to a common purpose.

In heaven we will praise our Savior God with our whole being, making use of each ability in our praise proclama-

tion. Is it not a glimpse of heavenly reality when the Spirit convinces people that even now our whole life is a sacrifice of praise? *Offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—which is your spiritual worship.*

It matters not how our interests and talents are distributed, each one can be part of our hymn of praise. What a thrill to see someone enjoy advanced calculus—and I'm glad it is not me! But Jesus be praised. The Lord of the Church ensures that such a gift is enlisted for gospel service. . . . What a joy to see someone excel in the computer lab while another can bench press 275 pounds. The Spirit harnesses both gifts for the good of the kingdom. . . . What excitement to live on a campus and see countless abilities on display that God can mold into a Christian life witness.

It is a spine-tingling reality when you look at the people of the MLC family and understand that God will send them forth—in so many ways and to so many places—and use their mouths to share Jesus as Savior and thus gather the elect. A glimpse of eternity? I can hardly imagine the scene: Souls from every tribe and nation and people and language gathered around the throne of the Lamb. Every MLC student surrounded by the people he or she has touched with the gospel, untold hundreds of people who have learned to confess Jesus through that student's faithful gospel witness—at recess, or in a hospital room, or on a practice field. Share the name of Jesus, and God works wonders.

The place

Now you might think that I'm really stretching it: the campus of MLC as a glimpse of heaven? True, it is a beautiful campus, with mature trees and glorious flowers that reflect the Creator's wise and good hand. True, we have facilities that reflect the generous hearts of God's good people. Yet the place is a glimpse of heaven in a far deeper sense.

In heaven we are always in the presence of our Savior God. He is everywhere and fills everything in every way. But even on earth we enjoy that amazing presence of our Savior God. Though we might not see him visibly, his promise rings true: Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.

If heaven is living in the presence of God, is it not a glimpse of heaven every time sinners gather in the name of Jesus and hear the life-giving message of the unconditional gospel? Is it not a glimpse of heaven when we remember that the Word of the living God is the powerful and creating word that makes all things new? If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come! Is this not a glimpse of the new heavens and the new earth Jesus has in store for us?

One hundred days—already a glimpse of eternity. Please join me in thanking God for the privilege of pondering such realities at this place . . . with these people . . . in this purpose we all share. ❁

Mark Zarling is the President of Martin Luther College.

Speaking for the Earth

Paul R. Boehlke

"It is the Biblical view of nature that gives nature a value in itself..."

- Francis A. Schaeffer

Voices calling for change

Recently Edward O. Wilson of Harvard called upon Christians to join him in defending the Earth. In the form of an open letter to a Southern Baptist pastor, Wilson says that the whole Creation is in deep trouble, and he wonders why the Church has not made saving it part of its ministry. The Church should turn from arguments with science about our origin to showing greater concern for the here and now, says Wilson. Here science and the Church, whom Wilson views as the two most powerful influences on humans, can find unity.¹

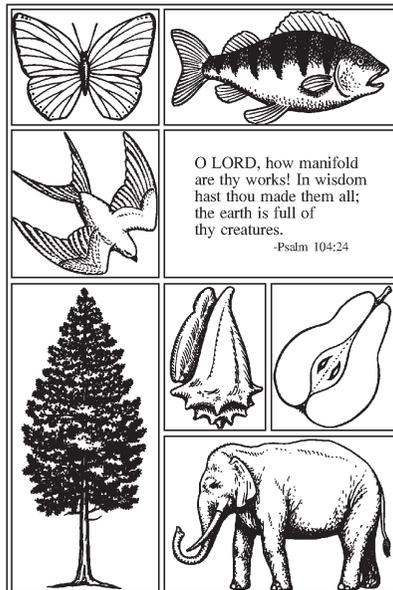
While Wilson's voice is an important one, Christians actually have stronger intrinsic arguments for protection of

the Earth based on a much deeper motivation.² Raised as a Southern Baptist, Wilson still claims some remnants of belief that he calls provisional deism. He says that he is not an agnostic or an atheist, but we need to pray that he will remember what he was taught about Christ in his youth.

Of course, that aside, any human can call for help. Anyone can rightly argue that the Earth we live on is in trouble and ask that everyone should get together to see what could be done. Certainly, Wilson has documented damage to the

ecosystems of the Earth and is highly qualified to alert us and to call for help.³ However, it should be noted that arguments over evolution and concerns over the present state of the environment do not represent a dichotomy in which one is forced to choose either one or the other. We can show greater concern for the Earth without sacrifice of other issues.

Voices within the



Church have been saying the same for a long time. Coming to mind are Francis A. Schaffer, Lionel Basney,⁴ John W. Klotz,⁵ Loren Wilkinson,⁶ and Calvin DeWitt,⁷ These and more have tried to raise Christian awareness of the need to care for the Earth. Some of the above writers were stirred to react to an influential essay carefully argued by Lynn White appearing in *Science*. White, a historian, maintained that Christianity was actually to blame for the ecological crisis because of a basic assumption in theology that mankind is separate from nature and is free to do anything.⁸

One, of course, cannot blame Christianity because of how Christians might act. Christians have always managed to break every law that God has given us. We can be slow to understand, blind to the applications of our faith, and quick to serve ourselves. The point is that Christianity need not be faulted for a lack of ethics concerning nature.⁹ There is no need for some new ethical system to guard the Creation; the need is to renew our understanding of our relationships to God and our neighbors. We also need to recognize the connections of humans to nature. God uses nature to sustain us.

A problem may occur with our teaching of the sources of sin. We typically list (1) the Devil, (2) the world, and (3) our flesh. Our definitions need to be clear. Luther helpfully adds (4) our sinful attitude as an insight to the tally.¹⁰ Furthermore, Pastor Richard Lauersdorf points out that how we react to the world is the point. The Devil, who is behind it all, can make drugs, drink,

illicit sex, sensations, popularity, possessions, and power attractive and destructive.¹¹ The world is filled with temptations and is suffering because of sin. Yet, we are in the world and dare not go so far as to include the air we breathe or the bread we eat as things to be avoided. We have it right when we quote scripture accurately and say that money is not root of all evil; rather the love of money is. More often, when we list the world as a source of sin, we are talking about our culture along with abuses in and of nature.

But do we really need to care? Aren't we going to Heaven? Won't God maintain the Earth for as long as it needs to exist and then it will pass away? Is care of the environment part of the mission of the Church?

A gnostic view of nature

The early Church went through a long theological battle with Gnosticism (special knowledge) that is apparently seeing some revival at the present time.¹² Briefly and with the admission that many variations exist, Gnostics regard nature and the material world as flawed, corrupt, and evil from the very beginning. This view sees the creator in Genesis as a lesser god who is evil while the true god remains distant and beyond our senses. The Creation was not even authorized by the true god. Our human spirit is regarded as divine but trapped in matter and limited by the physical senses. You can see that the Devil likes to turn things on their heads, and so some Gnostics believe that the

snake in the Garden of Eden was actually doing good by telling Adam and Eve to eat of the Tree of Knowledge (Gnosis). Accordingly, the changes that occurred in Adam and Eve freed them, making them fully human. Interestingly, Eve is often viewed as a superior spirit to Adam, and some claim that the true god is feminine.

So it follows that if people free themselves from material, they will return to the true god[dess] who was the source of spirit. Inner spiritual experiences and visions that transcend the physical are valued as sources of truth. This teaching has variations but generally takes a dim view of nature, flesh, sex, and anything material. The result may be that one tries to avoid anything natural, as in asceticism, or jumps to an opposite extreme of doing whatever one wishes because it does not really matter, literally.

Interestingly, the Gnostic view of the world as an illusory prison has provided material for many modern writers including science fiction author Philip K. Dick, who claimed a life changing vision from God; Grant Morrison, author of "The Invisibles;" and certainly the Wachowski brothers, creators of "The Matrix." Thus the ideas continue to float about in society and capture people's imaginations.

What is a Christian's view of nature?

Gnostic thinking is not a theology that is nicely apart from us or found in neatly organized locations that we can avoid. It may seep in anywhere as pointed out in

the previous discussion of the use of "world" as source of sin. Comments that demean nature and physical reality are still being heard among Christians. An additional problem is the common view that God will preserve us no matter what we do and sometimes our politics can blind us. To the contrary, Scripture has much to say about Creation that is positive. Nature is often used to illustrate spiritual concepts (for example: Luke 13:34). Scripture also warns us not to test God in dealing with the physical world (Luke 4: 9-12). The challenge for us is to view God's Creation from a proper perspective.

To this task, it cannot escape us that the whole Decalogue applies to this issue. First of all, God made everything and has maintained ownership. Psalm 24:1 states, "The Earth is the Lord's, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it." The universe is His handiwork, His artwork. We are also His creatures, his design, made from physical material and tied to the rest of material Creation. Harm to the environment harms every creature connected to that system. From our origin we were directed to function as stewards with permission to use but not to abuse nature (Genesis 1:28). If we love the Maker as we are commanded to do in the first table of the law, we will respect what He has made. To trash the environment, insults the Designer.

Yet, the Creator is distinct from nature. We do not worship nature when we care for it; we worship God. Further, we note that God did become flesh and lived among us in his creation.

The second table of the law urges us to love our neighbor. If we love our neighbor, we will not hurt or harm fellow humans both now and in the future in any way including damaging the place in which all of us live. We are not free to exhaust resources without regard for the needs of future generations. To take from nature without any thought of the effects that may occur involves stealing and coveting. Justice calls for sharing the resources God has given us. To pollute the environment or to waste resources in the name of profit constitutes stealing by not paying the full costs of processing and is murder if it hurts or harms. Then again to cover up known dangers with false claims of safety is false witness and again may involve murder. Even the sixth commandment is not safe from ecological implications. Sex with multiple partners spreads disease and can affect populations and their economies. For example, in Zambia one in every six adults is living with HIV, 98,000 people died of AIDS in 2005, the life expectancy at birth has fallen below 40 years, and some 710,000 children are AIDS orphans.¹³ We need to carry out our activities with wisdom,

working out what we do with care. In addition situations such as we see in Zambia also call for our help, for we are all made in the image of God.

The continuing, challenging task of the Lutheran educator is to teach all subjects from a Scriptural viewpoint. Professor Martin Galstad wrote, "The problem always is to clear the distinction between the realm above us and the realm below us, (two kingdoms) and always to use the lower according to the guidance of the higher."¹⁴ Our view of nature ought to flow from our faith. To this effort consider a summary of the principles in Fig. 1.

The creation is suffering (Rom. 8:22). Since sin entered the creation, we experience all sorts of problems in nature. All organisms change their environments. This cannot be helped; however, humans with sinful desires and ever increasing technological power are in the position of being able to cause devastating changes. As new men and women, we are also in the position of being able to bring healing and to repair. We need to act in ways that respect God's Creation and its purpose. We need to learn all that we can about

FIG. 1: PRINCIPLES FROM SCRIPTURE GUIDING ACTION TOWARD CREATION

1. The Creator has maintained ownership while we are stewards. The Creation is not ours to do with as we please. We are caretakers.
2. Nature is suffering because of human sin.
3. We are to act as masks of God.
4. If we love God, it follows that we will respect what He has created (the first table of the law).
5. If we love our neighbors, it follows that we will not damage the environment in which we all live. The goods of nature are meant to sustain all life on the planet (the second table of the law).

nature so that we can act in sustainable ways that allow the continuation of human life.

In every calling we witness

Martin Luther taught that every legitimate earthly vocation is a calling. Through the various positions that Christians hold, God acts to bless others. In this manner, God gives food through farmers, order and peace through officials, knowledge and education through teachers, and the Gospel of forgiveness of sins through preaching and teaching ministers. All these people act as masks of God. Therefore, humans should perform their vocations well — to the glory of God. So it follows that in every vocation, that to the best of our ability, we will care for the environment as the opportunity occurs.¹⁵ Jerry L. Poppe, who teaches business economics at Wisconsin Lutheran College, has warned Christians in his book on ethics in business against the abuse of the environment for short-term economic gains. “When we pollute, degrade the environment, and destroy what God entrusted to us, we are mismanaging his resources and defying his intentions.”¹⁶

Evidence of belief is found in how people act. Biology teacher Tom Mellon at Kettle Moraine Lutheran High School has led an outstanding project to educate and demonstrate care of the Earth. In 2001 Mellon led the setting up of a cutting edge wetland water treatment facility to treat the wastewater from the high school. Wetland plants and microbial-rich gravel are parts of

the natural treatment system. Aeration of the system is powered by wind, and a pump is powered by an array of photovoltaic panels. The setup is even integrated into the KMLHS science curriculum because students continue to monitor the site and calculate its benefits.¹⁷

When one walks into Lamb of God Evangelical Lutheran School at Woodlawn Lutheran Church in West Allis, Wisconsin, you will find separate collection containers for paper, plastic, and aluminum near the cafeteria. The school also collects newspapers for recycling.¹⁸ Imagine what a scientist would think of your congregation or school when a place to recycle at a social function is available. Our actions speak.

Robert Anderson, a natural resources teacher at Wisconsin Lutheran College, has led students in setting up a demonstration rain garden on the campus in 2006. Water runoff during storms in Milwaukee has caused local flooding and often overwhelmed the sewerage treatment system compelling the dumping of raw sewerage into Lake Michigan. When the land is paved or covered, water runoff increases. Rain gardens, quite simply, are gardens that soak up running water from roofs, paved driveways and walks. Such gardens are better at absorbing water than a lawn. Different from your typical flower garden, rain gardens are planted with wild flowers and deep-rooted native vegetation. Like a sponge they can be placed near downspouts on a home or other runoff locations to capture water. The water then gradually soaks in and replenishes the ground water. Another

idea has been to attach rain barrels to downspouts and then to use the water to irrigate gardens during dry weather.

Things to do in our schools

Perhaps you are wondering if there are things that you can do. The basic idea is to think globally but to act locally. Bagging waste and weighing it on a bathroom scale can measure the amount produced by a small population in a classroom or school. For example, as part of a class project, a team of college students asked other students to scrape their plates into a plastic bag after they were done eating. Previously, one of the students had weighed herself with the plastic bag. She then stepped onto the scale and weighed herself with the bag of collected wasted food. The increase in weight at the second weighing gave the team the weight of food discarded during the lunch period. The figure was then divided by the number of students contributing to the bag. This gave an average amount of waste per student.

This weighing could also be done with the waste paper being generated in a classroom. Daily reporting and graphing the amounts of waste can motivate people to change habits.

Students can discuss ways to reduce waste such as not taking food that they will not eat or using both sides of a piece of paper. The school can also set up special containers to collect waste that can be recycled. Many schools have separate containers for aluminum, paper, and plastic.

One can also track the use of energy in buildings by reading the electric and gas meters at various times.

Schools can plant gardens with flowers that attract butterflies.

Clean water is essential to life. One can study the water cycle and reflect on human use of this resource. A source for teachers is posted on the web.¹⁹ *Discovering God's Creation* has a number of activities that support the study of our environment. For examples, "A Field Investigation of a Nearby Stream or Pond," "Making Recycled Paper," "Water Distribution Demonstration," "Global Warming Indicator," "Wildlife Manager," and "Plants Give Off Water" and many others would also fit in a curriculum that includes stewardship of nature.²⁰

Conclusion

Scientists are reporting that the Earth is in trouble. We should consider this issue. God must have taken pleasure in creating nature or why did he bother. He originally placed humans into a beautiful garden. He directed Noah to save the animals. He blessed Israel with a land flowing with milk and honey. He established rules for Israel that allowed the land to rest and recover. Above all He took on material flesh to save us and even kept his physical body after His resurrection. Acting as masks of God, we also will find it natural to care for nature thereby showing love for God and love for our neighbor. ♣

END NOTES

¹Wilson, Edward O. *The Creation: An Appeal To Save Life On Earth*. New York: Norton, 2006.

²Schaeffer, p. 58.

³Wilson, Edward O. *The Future of Life*. New York: Vintage, 2002.

⁴Basney, Lionel. *An Earth-Careful Way of Life: Christian Stewardship and the Environmental Crisis*. Downer's Grove: Intervarsity, 1994.

⁵Klotz, John W. *Ecology Crisis: God's creation & Man's Pollution*. St. Louis: Concordia, 1971.

⁶Wilkinson, Loren (ed). *Earthkeeping in the '90s: Stewardship of Creation*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans: 1991.

⁷Wilkinson, Ibid.

⁸White, Lynn. "Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis." *Science* 155: 1203-1207. This essay continues to be widely read at colleges and universities. It is also found on the web.

⁹Calls for a new environmental ethic are common and may be driven by either misunderstanding or, in some cases, deeper feelings against Christianity.

¹⁰Luther, Martin. *Large Catechism*. Trans. by J. N. Lenker, Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1935, p. 37.

¹¹Lauersdorf, Richard E. "Hang On, Christian Confirmand." *Forward in Christ*, Vol. 73:10, 5-15-1986. available on the WELS website.

¹²Claims of secret knowledge, references to the Gnostic writings, and alternate understandings suppressed by organized Christianity are part of the popular fictional book, *The Da Vinci Code*,

by Dan Brown.

¹³UNAIDS/WHO 2006 Report on the global AIDS epidemic. cited at "HIV and AIDS in Zambia: the epidemic and the impact," <http://www.avert.org/aids-zambia.htm> (visited 1-11-07).

¹⁴Galstad, Martin. "Background for Teaching." essay delivered at the Arizona-California Lutheran Teachers Conference meeting in Phoenix, November 1955, p. 16

¹⁵Veith, Gene Edward. *The Spirituality of the Cross: The Way of the First Evangelicals*. St. Louis: Concordia: 1999, pp 71-90.

¹⁶Poppe, Jerry L. *I'm a Christian Even at Work: The Ethics of Business and Economics*. Milwaukee: Northwestern, 2006, pp 97-103.

¹⁷http://www.wgba.org/artman/publish/article_128.shtml This webpage set up by the Wisconsin Green Building Alliance, 1-28-2004 details the project at Kettle Moraine Lutheran High School, (visited 1-10-07).

¹⁸Personal visit, 1-21-07.

¹⁹<http://www.k12.atmos.washington.edu/k12/pilot/water_cycle/teacherpage.html>

²⁰Boehlke, Paul, Roger Klockziem & John Paulsen. *Discovering God's Creation: A Guidebook to Hands-on Science*. New Ulm: Martin Luther College Printshop, 1997. The book is out of print but is available on the website of Martin Luther College.

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Continuing Education for LES Teachers

Ryan Hill

How does a person become a good teacher? There are a variety of components that go into this endeavor. Maybe you would say a person has to like to be around children and have some skill in working with their parents or guardians. Perhaps you would say the best teachers know their content well and how it can be worked into a student's everyday life. No doubt your list wouldn't stop there. In fact, it would be difficult to compile a complete list of what makes a good or even the best teacher. But whatever your list looks like, in the end one item would be there. Teachers learn.

There are a number of formal names for it. For example, we call it continuing education or professional development. I will be using the term continuing education throughout this article. There are also a variety of definitions for continuing education. My personal feeling is that continuing education is anything we do to expand our knowledge and experiences to be better at what we do today than we were yesterday. Ten years ago I was called by a congregation to be the principal of their school. I was 23 years old and felt woefully inadequate to lead a staff of teachers, students, and parents. I also felt at the time that trying to enroll in a higher degree program was not an option. There were simply too many obligations in the classroom,

congregation and at home. I felt that doing so would have been difficult and would have done more harm than good. At the same time, I felt an immediate need to grow as a leader. I knew I had to intentionally work at being a better leader and also believed that teachers are learners. I decided I would read everything I could get my hands on that dealt with leadership. I researched certain authors and read their books. I surrounded myself with quality mentors and other great leaders. I paid attention to what they did, how they operated, and asked them for their reading lists. In that way I grew. I continued my education in a way that worked for me at the time. The point is, that as educators, we have to grow and in order to do that we have to plan for it. We don't do it because our principal or Board of Education says so, but because teachers learn. My encouragement is to find a way to grow. Maybe you prefer workshops or in-service training in short sessions. Maybe you prefer to read independently and like or need the freedom and flexibility this method provides. Maybe you like the cohesiveness of a structured higher degree program at a college or university. Maybe you are fond of a combination approach. Whatever the method, seek opportunities to expand your familiarity with your profession, increase your skill and in doing so raise your level of productivity.

“Why do I have to learn this stuff?” “What am I going to get out of this?” In most instances a teacher finds this as an irritating question. It usually means a student doesn’t really want to learn or wants to blame either his lack of desire or capacity to do so on you, his teacher. We may dislike hearing these questions from our students. But isn’t it true that we ask the same question when we are making decisions about how to continue our own education? Imagine if we had a classroom full of learners that were continually asking us not what are we going to get out of this, rather what can we contribute. Wouldn’t that change the entire dynamic of the classroom...of the learning? Professional educators, more than that, professional Christian educators by very nature of the work we do, are contributors. Think of the difference in your perspective when you are looking to give as opposed to receive. In a way, it is the difference between hosting and just being a guest at a party. How does this play out in the continuing education arena? Whether the event is a formal classroom setting, a faculty in-service, or an informal conversation with a colleague, as part of a community of learners your mindset is that of a person who looks for opportunities to bring your unique experiences to a discussion. Continually look for opportunities to expand, to extend your knowledge and experiences, to connect new knowledge to that which is already part of you for the purpose of sharing them with others so they may do the same. This can happen in dramatic or subtle ways. What are you contributing

to you students, parents, congregations, and colleagues? Are you helping them to be contributors? I believe these are fundamental questions to answer in the area of continuing education. Looking at continuing education through the eyes of a contributor will give a fresh perspective on your learning and teaching.

Do you remember when you were in high school trying to determine what career to choose and what school to use to help you along that path? If you were like most young men and women there wasn’t a shortage of people willing to share their opinions and offer advice on the matter. Imagine if you knew then what you know now about making good decisions and wise educational choices. Now that you are on the back side of all those career decisions another question arises. How am I going to continue my education? The answer to the question is personal to each individual, but the framework for the decision may be universal. Evaluate your gifts, your staff, and your congregation. Identify areas in need of contribution. If you cannot see them, ask other leaders for their help. Pinpoint areas that will be mutually beneficial to both your gifts or skills and the needs of your school or congregation. I served with a faculty member that recognized our school’s need to improve in the area of language arts and reading. This individual chose to continue his education in that area and in turn helped the rest of us on the staff to improve our understanding of teaching language arts and reading in our classrooms. We were able to employ strate-

gies that strengthened our overall performance in that area. In every school there are areas in need of improvement. See it as your personal responsibility and privilege to find an area and be a part of improving it.

Several times in my life I have had the privilege of going to Alaska. On those trips I love to go deep sea fishing. We have always gone with an outfitter in order to maximize our time and to ensure that we would be successful in bringing home fish to eat. In addition to helping us catch the fish, most outfitters also process and package your catch for easy transportation. It is part of what you pay for. It always impresses me as to how quickly the guides are able to make their way through a large number of fish. Part of the efficiency comes from their experience, but the other part of it comes from their tools. I watched carefully how they were able to do it. Before a guide begins to process the fish, he runs his knife through a diamond sharpener over and over again until he has just the right edge with which to work. After each fish he repeats the process in order to get the same results. Without the proper edge on the blade, he would end up with less than adequate filets for the guests.

Teachers are not halibut guides, but they need sharp tools. Continuing education is the diamond blade that keeps our tools as sharp as they need to be for the guests we welcome into our classrooms each morning. Honing those tools will give us the best results year after year in our ministries.

I recently attended a workshop on the

topic of writing in the classroom. I am not telling you this to prove to you that I am following my own advice. I have another point. In that workshop we learned dozens of strategies to get our students more engaged in their writing and communicating. The workshop presenter repeatedly shared a phrase that “stuck” to my brain. She taught us to “show, don’t tell” when we are working to get children to add more detail to their writing and really make it memorable for the audience. The phrase is simple, unforgettable and understandable. I also think it has application here in a little different way. Take a snapshot of your professional life right now. If a third party asked your students if you were a learner would the students see that example in you. Naturally they would call you the teacher, but do they see you learning with them? As the lead learner in the classroom, we have a great opportunity to show our students how to learn and not just tell them to learn. The best teachers I had were the ones who learned right alongside me. They were the ones that were transparently sharing with me what they were learning. Occasionally they were the ones who answered “I don’t know, let’s find out together.” They were a visible example of learning. In a classroom setting there is something very powerful in humbling yourself to learn with and like a child. Now fast forward to your retirement celebration. It doesn’t matter if that is 30 or 3 years away. What will you want those who get up to speak to say? Will you want them to talk about how you taught them stuff? Wouldn’t it be

Hill

great if your former students saw you as a person who exemplified learning? As someone who didn't just teach, but who was involved with them in learning? Whether it was in the way you studied and taught God's word or any other subject in the curriculum. Let's show our students that we are taking on the challenge of learning our entire lives.

Where do I go from here? Here is an example of a plan to help you be proactive in your own continuing education.

- Pray for wisdom and energy.
- With a colleague...
 - ◆ Analyze and identify your gifts and areas of interest.
 - ◆ Analyze and identify your staff or congregation's areas of need.

◆ Locate a match.

- Work with your principal and/or Board of Education on your continuing education goals.
- Set some structured timeline for completion (i.e. read three books this year on a certain topic).
- Find a way to contribute what you have learned with colleagues or students (i.e. conference presentation, thematic classroom unit).
- Each semester set a goal to show your students you are a lead learner in your classroom.

God bless your continuing education efforts! 🙏

Ryan Hill is principal and teacher and Trinity Lutheran School, Bay City, MI.

MLC Alumni Society to Set Sail

Steve Balza

With 12 years of faithfully serving our synod and over 2,000 graduates trained for ministry, MLC is in the process of formally establishing its alumni society. The goal will be to build lifelong relationships with the alumni, providing opportunities for them to support and stay connected to their friends, faculty, colleagues, and college. Attendees and alumni of MLC's two predecessor institutions (Northwestern College and DMLC) are also strongly encouraged to join.

Alumni director Steve Balza notes, "Our alumni care deeply about what's happening at MLC and want to stay informed. They want to be advocates for full-time ministry as an occupation, and they want to ensure that future generations of WELS members will have faithful shepherds to lead and feed them. Having an organized and active alumni society will provide opportunities to do that."

All alumni and attendees are encouraged to take a brief Alumni Attitudes, Interests, and Information Survey found on the MLC website. Simply go to www.mlc-wels.edu, click the alumni link, then follow the directions to take the survey. It takes only 5 minutes and will provide the director and future alumni board with valuable insight and direction. If you don't have web access and would like to get a copy of the survey mailed to you, please call (507) 354-8221 x 387.

Steve Balza is Director of Alumni Relations, Martin Luther College, New Ulm, MN. Phone: 507.354.8221 ext. 387 Cell: 507.217.1731 Fax: 507.354.8225 Email: balzasj@mlc-wels.edu.

Seeing God's Love in Christmas

Cheryl Root

Have you made your list and checked it twice? Yes, it's Christmastime. That busy time of year in which many find themselves checking off lists of tasks that they seem to have to do: shopping, gift wrapping, decorating, sending out cards, attending parties, caroling . . . the list seems endless. And all for what? Yuletide joy, peace on earth? For many, Christmas is less than joyful and peace on earth is but a dream. Many hit January second discouraged and exhausted, glad that the season is over for another year.

I know that I must sound like a number one Scrooge when it comes to the Christmas season. But to me it is a sad and frustrating time of the year because many go through the season following Christmas traditions and not experiencing the peace and joy of what the season is about – God's gift of peace and love given in that babe in Bethlehem. On that first Christmas the angels sang, "Peace on earth good will to men." That wasn't peace between men, but peace between God and men. You see, we are sinners, enemies of God. And no matter how good we think we are, God demands perfection. We can't give it. "All men sin and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23) However, God

who is rich in mercy sent his only son, Jesus, to die for our sins. "God so loved the world," the scripture reads, "that He gave His only Son that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life." That gift of God in Christ is what Christmas is all about.

So how can we use traditions of the season to focus on God's saving gift? This was a question that many early Christians asked. Believe it or not traditions such as gift giving, decorating with pine boughs and feasts had been celebrated at this time of the year hundreds of years before Christ. The Romans, Europeans, Persians, Egyptians, and Babylonians, to name a few, all had rituals during this time of year to celebrate the winter solstice, the shortest day of the year. That is why in 350 A.D. Julius I, Bishop of Rome, announced December 25th as the date in which Christmas would be celebrated. The celebration of Christmas would replace those ancient festivals. Early Christians chose to incorporate only those ancient traditions that would help them to focus on God's gift of love and salvation. For instance, decorating with pine boughs reminded them of life eternal found in Christ Jesus, and the giving of gifts reminded them of God's greatest gift of love, Jesus.

So what about traditions today? Below is a list of decorations and colors common during the holiday season that can help us to see God's love in Christmas. Let's start with the colors red, white, and green.

RED is a reminder that "...the blood Jesus Christ, His Son, purifies us from all sin" (1 John 1:7).

WHITE is the color of perfection and holiness. Christ was our perfect sacrifice. The angel Gabriel told Mary "...the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God" (Luke 1:35).

GREEN – The evergreen boughs and Christmas trees are a reminder of Christ's words, "Because I live, you also will live" (John 14:19).

Besides the above colors, there are also other reminders of the true meaning of Christmas. For instance:

SILVER AND GOLD are a reminder that Jesus is "King of Kings and Lord of Lords" (Rev. 19:16). Gold also brings to mind one of the gifts of the magi as recorded in Matthew 2 and the description of heaven pictured in Revelation 21:18, 21.

LIGHTS – Hear Jesus words about himself, "I am the light of the world" (John 8:12).

WREATHS – The round shape, which has no beginning and no end, is a symbol that "He [Jesus] is the true God and eternal life" (1 John 5:20).

ANGELS – Many people decorate with angels. May they rejoice in their song sung to shepherds that first Christmas night, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests" (Luke 2:14).

CANDY CANES – The shape forms a letter 'J' and also a shepherd's staff. Jesus referred to himself as the Good Shepherd who lay down his life for his sheep (John 10:11). We are the sheep of his pasture. He died for you and me.

SNOW - Some say, "It's not Christmas unless you have snow." Snow is a reminder, not of that Andy William's song, "I'm Dreaming of a White Christmas," but rather of the words of Isaiah 1:18: "Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow." We can be thrilled that we are purified through the blood of Christ!

GIFT GIVING – This tradition is a reminder of the greatest gift of all – Jesus (John 3:16). We are also told in James 1:17, "Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights...."

So as you put up those decorations, wrap those gifts, listen to the carols, and send your holiday greetings, take time from the hustle and bustle to reflect on the true gift that you have been given – salvation through Christ. As with Christians of old, hold to those traditions that help "fix our eyes on Jesus" (Heb. 12:2). See God's love in Christmas. Most important, take time to hear about that wonderful news of salvation, not just during the holidays, but throughout the year.

May God's great gift of love fill you with peace and joy this holiday season and always. ❖

Cheryl Root teaches at Fox Valley Lutheran High School, Appleton, Wisconsin

Windows to Christ

Paul L. Willems

“We would like to see Jesus” John 12:21.

By far the greatest person found in our classrooms is Jesus. He is the Master Teacher. He is the Message we teach. He is the reason our classrooms exist. We should think of our students like the Greeks who came to Philip at the Passover Feast and said, “We would like to see Jesus.” That’s the cue as to where we come into the picture. We are to be like Andrew and bring them to see their Savior. We are to be “Windows To Christ.”

It is always important for windows to be clear. People want to see through windows to look at something. People do not want to look and see an opaque window. They want to look past the window to the view outside. Our ministry is to be all about Christ. It is not to be all about us. Andrew is our model of ministry.

We don’t know much about the Apostle Andrew. His name occurs only thirteen times in the New Testament. He speaks very little, but when he does talk he has great things to say. The first time Andrew speaks he says, “We have found the Messiah.” He shared his discovery with his brother Simon Peter and brought him to Christ (John 1:42). We hear him again as he says, “Here is a boy with five small barley loaves and two

small fish, but how far will they go among so many?” (John 6:9). Andrew can see the problem and is thinking out loud about the solution. While he couldn’t solve the problem by himself, he knew Jesus could. Finally we are told that when some Greek men asked to see Jesus, Philip told Andrew and Andrew in turn brought them to Jesus. (John 12:21-22)

You might say, “But I teach in a Christian classroom. I already tell my students about Jesus, their Savior.” Good. That is our task as called workers. This paper is written to demonstrate we also show our students Jesus by our actions. It has been said that actions often speak louder than words.

The Apostle Paul reminds us in his epistle to the Philippians, “Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!” (Philippians 4:4). When something is repeated it is done to emphasize the point. We are to rejoice. That is an action verb. Paul goes on to describe what actions demonstrate our joy in Jesus. First, we are to be gentle. This means we are to show consideration to others. At another place Paul wrote, “...consider others better than yourselves” (Philippians 2:3). In our world, too often gentleness is thought of as weakness. People look down on the

gentle person, but God exults those who are considerate. (Confer 1 Timothy 3:3 and Titus 3:2) In the educator's words, we should become a "guide at the side not a sage on the stage." Second, don't be anxious. Don't worry. We sometimes bring our personal agendas and baggage into our classrooms; after all, we are only human. Paul tells us not to do that. Our students need to see a teacher who is confident in Christ. A worried teacher, an anxious teacher has his or her anxieties rub off on their students. The students also become uncertain. Anxious people are like drowning people. They know they are in trouble, but resist any help. As a drowning person fights the one who comes to his rescue, so a worrier ignores God and does not use prayer as a call to God for help. We want to be examples of people who pray. We want to show our students Jesus. Third, as Christians we must think good thoughts. We need to dwell on the positive and not be consumed by the negative. A colleague once explained dwelling on the negative and ignoring the positive as "stinkin thinkin". Paul wrote, "Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things." (Philippians 4:8) Finally, be content. Grumbling helps no one. It gives the wrong signals to our students. When we grumble about our salaries, our teaching duties, our extra curricular assignments or anything else, we subtract from the honor of being a called worker. We become

opaque windows, or walls, which hide Christ from our students. Our discontent becomes a discouragement to our students. Who would serve a God who does not bless his people abundantly with all we need and more? Who would want to become a full time church worker if all they hear from us are complaints? We also turn off our families when we are not content and when we fail to rejoice in being a called worker in the Lord's field. This attitude hinders God's kingdom rather than helps it.

Windows are transparent. We look thought them. This means our motives for working with our students are also transparent. They see right through us. We need to present good motives, positive thinking and Christ-like examples to them. Our ministry is all about Christ, and is not all about us. If, in future years, our students say, "I really appreciated how my teacher took time to work with me and to show me Jesus, but I can't remember her name"; that's okay. That student remembered the important name – the name of Jesus. In the words of the hymn writer, "May his spirit live within me as I seek the lost to win. And may they forget the channel seeking only him" (CW #467, stanza 6). Let's work on becoming clear "Windows To Christ" all throughout our lives. ❁

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Christians in Conflict

Kenneth Kremer

By proclamation the day of the royal wedding had been declared a Day-of-All-Days. The cathedral was filled to overflowing. Candlelight bathed its cavernous interior. Polished and festooned, the groom stood proudly at the center of a massive chancel, his eyes riveted on the long aisle that divided the nave into equal halves. A brace of handsomely outfitted escorts attended him. Banners bearing his crest fluttered from stonework arches that spanned the length of two parallel colonnades.

A magnificent pipe organ brought guests to their feet. Each strained to catch a glimpse of the beauty for whose hand the brave champion had soldiered so valiantly. Instead, a haggard female figure emerged from the shadows, her gown tattered and filthy. She lurched, dazed and unstable. Reddish welts and purple bruises marred her face. Teeth were missing. Blood trickled from one nostril. Her left eye was nearly swollen shut. A laceration oozed dark red from an open scalp wound. Her hair was a tangled mat of dried blood.

The specter limped forward, first supporting herself against one pew butt, then lunging toward the next, gathering strength at each oasis for another desperate foray toward her gentle

monarch. Guests were mortified. Groomsmen studied the floor. The organist stopped playing. All mourned silently for the faithful Prince who deserved better. His Bride had been fighting again.

The hymn proclaims, "From heav'n he came and sought her to be his holy Bride; with his own blood he bought her, and for her life he died." She is Christ's own body—The Church, his holy Bride. Of which you and I are part. While the imagery is metaphorical, the specter of conflict which the metaphor projects is all too real. And eminently self-convicting.

The purpose of this article is to consider the impact church conflict has on our lives and in our respective ministries. The biblical principles to which we will be referring apply to the Christian household and the Christian school setting as well. In fact, these principles flow directly from the very heart of our Christian faith, and are indispensable as a way of life for every believer in Jesus. So, it is important that along the way we make use of the opportunity to look inward for a better understanding of the condition of our own hearts as we either engage in conflict, or respond to it.

While it may not be obvious to the

casual observer, we have conflict in the WELS—certainly enough to bring shame to our Master’s household. We pummel each other with criticism and draw blood with our sharp-tongued sarcasm. We tear each other down, making it impossible to move forward. We prostitute ourselves to false idols constructed from the raw material of ego. We fight in our homes, on the school grounds, in faculty lounges, at our places of business, and in the congregational arena. We quarrel in our marriages, clash with family members, and trash the ministries of coworkers. We lash out against brothers and sisters, demanding, like spoiled siblings, to get our way. We spin truth to gain leverage. We talk dirt behind the backs of others, or paint them with broad and uncompimentary brushstrokes. We use our insider’s voice to manipulate the system. We judge one another’s motives, punish one another, and occasionally damn one another to hell.

When we are not living as God’s children, conflict is who we are. We feed it scraps of pettiness and leave it to fester in a rancid pool of resentment. We incubate it in the nest of jealous pride until hatred can rise up again full-blown and white-hot.

Since The Fall, no one has experienced life completely free from conflict. While we know that God works for our good even when we are brutalized by it, conflict itself is never a good thing. It leaves lives shattered in its wake. Worse, it can damage or destroy a fragile faith.

The writer of Hebrews urged us to, “throw off everything that hinders and

the sin that so easily entangles” (12:1). Conflict is the perfect storm of sinful entanglements. Because of our natural inclination to serve self first, the most wholesome human desire can degenerate into an idolatrous obsession. And obsessions almost always lead to distorted truth. When truth is turned on its head, it becomes easy to judge another person’s motives and punish the offender. *I want. I obsess. I distort. I judge. I punish.* Five toxic strands in the deadliest of webs! Without intervention, extrication is virtually impossible.

Conflict in the church culture

Typically, there are four aspects of church culture that generate conflict: *1)divided allegiances; 2)authority issues; 3)boundary marking; and, 4)personal affairs.* These are further fueled by *misunderstandings, differences of opinion, competition, and mistrust.*

When two strong-willed individuals compete for the respect, admiration, or leadership of a congregation, the outcome can have major long-term affects on the congregation’s future ministry. Competition does not always bring out the best in people. The two rival personalities often spend time and energy gathering political support. They engage in subtle character assassination and collect a handful of ardent supporters who will speak passionately on their behalf. They may even evoke the authority of scripture or the sanctity of a divine call as their rationale for gaining control. As the conflict deepens, church members become pawns in a power

struggle. Left unaddressed, many members will be drawn into the melee. The resulting conflict can take a huge toll. Ministry work suffers because the church's energy is focused on the immediate threat. The two warring individuals may become consumed with envy. Consciences are burdened. Personal relationships may be damaged or destroyed when loyalties are called into question. Those with a weak or shallow faith become easy prey to the real Enemy, for the Prowling Lion is a skilled opportunist.

Sometimes differences occur over questions regarding direction. In times of rapid and dramatic change, transition is often the issue. Today church members are frequently divided over things like tradition or cultural identity. Worship styles, for example, have become a major bone of contention in many congregations. Some want to move forward and explore new frontiers. Others cling tenaciously to the past. These are legitimate questions that ultimately need to be answered in the light of Scripture. Unfortunately, members on either side of the debate begin to sense that their personal identity is being threatened. They forget that God is indeed in control of all things. The disagreement over the church's mandate becomes very personal. It can deteriorate into two camps vying for control of the church's program. Positions harden. Love for a fellow brother or sister in Christ cools quickly and animosity takes its place. Some individuals may even threaten to leave the congregation to search for another church that mir-

rors a musical or liturgical style that is more in keeping with their own personal taste.

In these worship wars, Scripture is often cited in support of either camp's position. But passages that talk about unity in Christ (for example, Romans 12:5; 1 Corinthians 10:17; Ephesians 4:13; or Galatians 3:28) and our love for one another as fellow members of the body of Christ are too often ignored.

In most cases, both sides need to step back to re-evaluate their positions in the light of the biblical teaching of *adiaphora*. *Adiaphora* is one of those doctrines that we can articulate quite well, but have difficulty applying to our daily lives.

In recent years fiscal threats have also frustrated our direction-setting process. Fiscal stresses can tear congregations apart. Conflicts over tight budgets and hard business decisions are occurring in many of our churches these days. The decisions that have to be made often affect called workers in negative ways. In places where love and compassion are not a key ingredient of the decision-making process, bitterness and relational breakdown can quickly disrupt an otherwise peaceful church.

Truth be told, effective, loving communication is not one of our church's strengths. The Old Adam is quick to criticize others and an endless cycle of blaming and hurtful accusations is set in motion. Soon the church's programs begin to suffer because few people want to make themselves the target of unrelenting criticism. People who have been elected into positions of leadership

often choose to merely follow; genuine leading is just too great a risk. Small irritations grow to become major issues. The poisoned environment can become so toxic that it chokes the life out of any program that is still enjoying success. Members begin to believe they are fighting a losing battle. Morale becomes the real issue. As folks lose heart, the petty disputes that once ignited the flames of conflict are forgotten long before the congregation is able to right the sinking ship. People involved in the initial stages of the conflict never reconcile; they merely go their own separate ways. If the congregation can manage to survive, the causes for the disturbance may go underground and are left to resurface years later.

Conflicts of the kind just described are often further exacerbated when a major fiscal decision is not communicated in an open and honest manner and vital information is not properly shared with the membership. Misunderstandings result from poor communication. The distance between misunderstanding and mistrust is minimal.

Mistrust likes to partner-up with all of the afore-mentioned stressors. In the end, mistrust is often the real catalyst for conflict. And the most serious disputes involve mistrust.

Mistrust is all about objective truth—who is telling it, and what is it? For people who are engaged in conflict, truth is inevitably subjective. In the emotion-charged environment of conflict, most of us are willing to trade a little bit of our integrity for increased leverage. This explains why conflict between two

parties that mistrust each other needs to be addressed as one would address sin. Initially, both sides will probably have to do some soul-searching with regard to how they have handled the truth.

Healthy communication involves active listening and speaking the truth in love. Many of the more common conflicts in church life could be eliminated with training in Christian communication.

Contrary to what most of us believe, when facts are communicated openly and with genuine compassion, people tend to be more understanding and forgiving. It's true that confidences need to be honored under certain circumstances. That said, when it is appropriate, we also need to make public disclosures as accurately and completely as possible so that members are not left to speculate.

There is an even better reason why we cannot be so reluctant to share at least some facts. When we keep people informed about the struggles and difficulties that others may be dealing with, we also give caring members an opportunity to offer their prayers and support on behalf of those who are caught in the crosshairs of conflict.

The human response to conflict

T. S. Eliot wrote, "Humanity cannot bear very much reality." How true. Human nature responds to the reality of conflict in a variety of ways. Many of these responses are quite negative and destructive. In his book, *The Peacemaker*, Ken Sande has depicted the spectrum

of human responses to conflict as a “slippery slope.” (See illustration.)¹ On one downside of the slope (left) lie three Escape Responses: denial, flight, and suicide. They represent behaviors that are self-directed. At the bottom of the opposite slope (right) lie three Attack Responses: assault, litigation, and murder. These are other-directed actions. Six Peacemaking Responses rise on the slope’s summit.

When we decide to overlook an offense, we are using a conflict management strategy aimed at defusing conflict before it can develop. But overlooking an offense is not always an appropriate response. In situations in which the offended person does not have the resources to mount a defense (for example, children, or the mentally retarded, etc.), a less passive choice is more appropriate.

On the opposite slope, the option to *call someone to account* for an offense is other-directed. It is an aggressive and active response that comes perilously close to making an accusation. Calling someone to account for sinful behavior in a loving way (*church discipline*) can lead to healing and reconciliation.

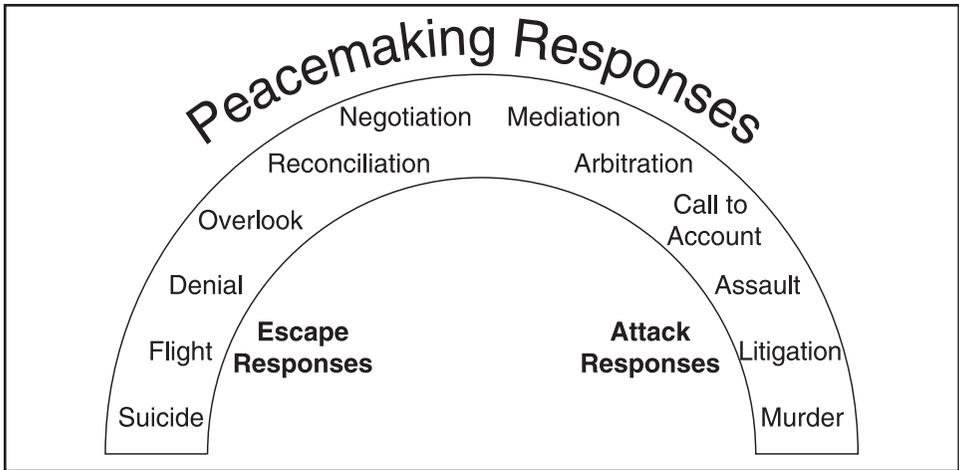
In Sande’s illustration it is easy to see how our responses to conflict can gather momentum down one side of the slippery slope or the other. Anyone who does not take the high road toward making peace is prone to slipping ever closer toward self-destruction or taking another life. The Apostle James was not speaking figuratively when he wrote, “... each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and

enticed. Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death” (1:14-15). While we should not automatically conclude that all conflict is sinful, by inference this text helps us understand one very important point: *Where there is conflict, sin is lurking nearby.* And sin is spiritual death.

On the landscape of the church, the close relationship between conflict and sin cannot be emphasized too much. Because we have been taught to “put the best construction on everything,”² God’s people are inclined to see conflict merely as two individuals with competing interests. A more realistic understanding of what is really going on views conflict as brothers and sisters in Christ caught in a tangled web of sin that threatens to undermine their hope of heaven.

Denial is conflict driven into the secret recesses of the heart, where even the denying individual will not have to pay attention to it. Plain and simple, denial is self-deception.

Denial thwarts any hope for resolution or reconciliation because it fails to recognize a problem—one that is probably leading someone to sin. Denying that conflict exists is just as dangerous as denying sin. Both declare, “Peace, peace, when there is no peace” (Jeremiah 6:14 ff.). (This is the charge that Jeremiah leveled against the church leaders of his day.) Failing to speak when speaking up is the only right thing to do is sin. An old saw bluntly asserts, “If you aren’t part of the solution, you are part of the problem.”



Courts of law sometimes describe marital conflict as irreconcilable differences. The same courts *negotiate, mediate, or arbitrate* a divorce settlement to bring closure to a broken marriage. Hurting individuals can, in some miserable way, now move on with their lives; their conflict is resolved.

But resolving conflict is not the same as establishing peace. A relationship once held dear by both parties is now only a shadow of its vital past. The union has been dissolved. Things may seem calm and peaceful on the surface, but the aftermath of a failed marriage is usually filled with disappointment, self-doubt, resentment, and untold heartache. There is very little real peace. The same is true when conflicts occur in congregational life.

Biblical reconciliation v. conflict resolution

Most conflict-resolution techniques do not heal broken hearts or restore crushed relationships. They solve prob-

lems by managing conflict. This is the best outcome that humankind can hope to achieve. We intervene, using settlement tools like negotiation, mediation, or arbitration to bring closure to an otherwise hopeless situation. In this way, we try to avoid outbreaks of the high-cost responses to conflict that occur at the lower ends of the slippery slope. These tools are valuable gifts from a loving Creator. If we did not have them, society would crumble and collapse.

But bartered, coached, or adjudicated settlements are limited in terms of providing authentic healing and restoring shattered relationships. They manage conflict. Thankfully, God did not settle for merely resolving the irreconcilable breach in our broken relationship. Instead, God has forgiven our sins for Jesus' sake and restored us to his eternal family through the miracle of baptism.

This remarkable template for addressing conflict is both a miracle of God's grace and a model of how he wants his children to overcome their differences with one another (Matthew 6:12).

Biblical reconciliation is the only response to conflict that has the power to turn hate-filled individuals into lovers after Christ's own model.³

Reconciliation with God came at a terrible price. When Jesus took up our fight, he did it in active obedience to his Father's will. But he was passive in the face of his human adversaries (Isaiah 53:7). The price he paid was his life. As an innocent victim, Jesus was the perfect model for "turning the other cheek" (Matthew 5:39). Most of us have great difficulty living out this New Testament concept in a natural world that thrives on conflict.

The biblical concepts of reconciliation through forgiveness and turning the other cheek get their power from the gospel. God intervenes with Word and sacrament to undo the damage that sin has done to our relationship. But, in Word and sacrament, he also provides the strength and courage to stand in the face of persecution. Sometimes his strategy involves a third party to encourage or intervene, or both. The point is that the entire process focuses on inner heart-change instead of external, pragmatic settlements.

The biblical approach to conflict changes warmongers into peacemakers by addressing the issue of sin and mending a hopeless rift in an irreconcilable relationship. Alfred Poirier writes, "Confession is the first step in exposing things as they really are, shining light into the chaotic darkness of conflict. It keeps us ever mindful that we are sinners saved by grace."⁴

God doesn't want us ever to forget

what he has done for us. But, when conflict entangles us in its deadly web, it is easy to lose sight of the foundations of our faith. The good news of the gospel is the on-going power that changes us into people fit for living in God's family. Our baptism is a gospel proclamation of that power. When we come face-to-face with the truth that we have hated our brother or sister in Christ, it is the right time to be reminded of our baptism. Our baptism reassures us that even those sins generated in the red-hot heat of conflict have been absolved for Jesus' sake. And it gives us the strength to seek reconciliation with someone we may have been viewing as the devil himself. It also empowers us to change our behaviors and begin treating enemies as brothers and sisters again. In addition to remembering our baptism, each time we commune with our Lord Jesus at his Table, we remember once again God's promise that "Where sin increased, grace increased all the more...." (Romans 5:20). "All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation" (2 Corinthians 5:18-19). "We must understand that the conflicts people are in are conflicts in people—conflicts in their hearts, conflicts in their desires, conflicts with demands and personal idols. These are the strongholds of sin. They are impregnable except through the gospel of Jesus Christ. And it is the gospel that we are called upon

to preach and teach.”⁵

The actual words of confession and absolution may differ, but the subtext is always the same: “I’m sorry,” and “You’re forgiven, for Jesus’ sake. Now go and live in peace.”⁶ This is *the ministry and the message of reconciliation* to which Paul is referring.

When gospel-driven reconciliation occurs, the terrible burden of sin is lifted. The hatred disappears. The broken relationship is restored. The Bride is reinstated. And the message that God loves me is remarkably fresh because it is so unexpected. Where there was once hatred and conflict there is now peace and love. Natural man cannot even begin to understand the miracle that has just occurred. And even though we may have heard it described a thousand times before, experiencing it is so much better. The astonishing surprise of seeing the gospel working in us, and in the people around us, makes every day a *Day-of-All-Days*.

A plank and a plan

Jesus taught several lessons on handling conflict to his disciples. Two, in particular, are bedrock to this discussion.

The first intones a stern warning against the hypocrisy of judging others: “Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother’s eye, and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye?” he asked. “How can you say to your brother, ‘Let me take the speck out of your eye,’ when all the time there is a plank in your own eye? You hypocrite,

first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother’s eye” (Matthew 7:1).

Among Christians this lesson about the plank is troublesome. We do not like having to think about it. When we are personally embroiled in a conflict, we try to avoid it altogether.

The huge plank of self-righteousness jammed in our eye (and everyone has one) causes us to overlook our own flawed motives and desires. Our sin-blurred vision plays tricks with an objective view of how things really are. It prompts us to conclude that the blame generally lies with someone else. The obstruction even blinds us to the fact that the person we are judging may be a brother or a sister in Christ.

This condition requires surgical removal of all delusions about our own goodness. For most of us it has to be repeated over and over, each time we face a situation in which we might be inclined to become our neighbor’s judge. When the operation has been completed, and we are exposed to the reality of our own sin, we are humbled. Only then can we exercise Christian love as we attend to the sliver in someone else’s eye.

This simple metaphor is so powerful because it conditions our hearts for dealing with other sinners by first becoming aware of our own shortcomings and weaknesses.

The humility that comes from facing the facts about one’s own sinful condition is prerequisite to a second key concept that Jesus outlined for us in

Matthew 18:15-20. In this text we have a simple plan for dealing with a fellow Christian who has committed a personal sin against you. Jesus intended that we use these steps to reclaim a lost sheep caught in a cycle of sin. His purpose was to demonstrate how we can, in practical terms, exercise our Christian love when sin is part of the conflict. There is a formulaic element to the plan. When you look carefully at the text, it is hard to miss the five conditional (if, ... then) stages, each another carefully taken step aimed at saving an erring brother or sister. We are wise to follow these steps in the hope of accomplishing just that. One of the practical values of following these steps is to place special emphasis on handling personal grievances in the most confidential way so that any potential for spreading conflict can be avoided.

Unfortunately, this same text has sometimes been misused to gain the high ground. By pointing an accusing finger at an enemy who has failed to follow the prescribed steps, the text can be made to have the aura of binding law that carries the very threat of hell. The affect is that of a counter-charge: "Guilty of failing to follow Matthew 18." When the text is used in this way, the accusation—a counter attack—is not borne of genuine humility, but instead flows from a spirit of prideful superiority. This tactic frustrates the prospect for biblical reconciliation by adding sin to a tangled snare.

The connection between the plank and the plan is intimate. Both are driven by the power of the gospel and have

agape' love at their heart. Both engage that same gospel power to disarm conflict through repentance and forgiveness. And both serve the church's greater good by creating a culture of peace in which God's work can remain the singular focus of congregational life.

A culture of peace

General Sherman once said, "War is hell." By extension, War in the church is hell in the church.

On the other hand, Jesus' work was all about peace. "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid" (John 14:27). The people of Christ's church need to be all about peace as well.

Today's church members are sophisticated people. Folks generally know when the Lord's Bride has been fighting again. They can sense a rift developing between the pastor and the congregation's leaders. They intuit dissension on a school faculty. They discern careless conversations that intimate a problem between the principal and the pastor. They perceive hostility between teachers and parents. A few bold individuals may voice concern. Others will simply leave to seek peace—spiritual, or otherwise—elsewhere.

Church loyalty is waning. This is a fact of life. It won't be difficult for some to move on to a church that emanates quiet serenity, even if they value our confessional position. The gap between what we say we believe and the way we

behave can become a stumbling block to their faith. Additionally, visitors are often eager to find a haven from the conflict that surrounds them in their day-to-day lives. They are looking for a community of believers that values peace in the way that Jesus valued it. If your church ambiance signals tension and turmoil instead of peace and unity, they will quickly pass you by.

Along with the ongoing preaching of the Word and the regular celebration of the sacraments, peace is a telltale mark of a Christian congregation. Biblical reconciliation is not an event that merely occurs; and then, when the dust settles, life goes on as it had before the conflict disturbed the peace. Making peace an organic component of everyday church life is a mindset and a lifestyle. Where peace has been carefully nurtured, the resulting culture opens new doors of opportunity to carry out Christ's ministry of reconciliation. In our synod-wide dialog about finding better ways to reach the lost, the vital importance of Matthew 5:9 appears to have gotten lost in the shuffle. Strong opinions about worship styles and whether our schools should be more oriented to nurture or outreach seem to be getting most of the attention. If we are sincere about reaching out to the unbelieving world with the *peace of God which transcends all human understanding* (Philippians 4:7), the time has come to give more thought to what Jesus had in mind when he said, "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God." ❧

END NOTES

¹From "The Peacemaker," by Ken Sande. Reprinted with the permission of Peacemaker Ministries, Inc.

²The Gausewitz translation of Luther's Small Catechism.

³On the Sande illustration biblical reconciliation has the best chance for occurring either when we call someone to account for sin (church discipline), or when we come together to discuss our differences in a non-confrontational way and seek reconciliation with each other as brothers and sisters in Christ.

⁴"The Peacemaking Pastor: A Biblical Guide to Resolving Church Conflict," Alfred Poirier, Baker, 2006.

⁵Ibid.

⁶"Christian Worship" contains an excellent order for Private Confession on pages 154-155. It is used only too rarely. In the author's opinion, church leaders need to reconsider practical ways to reinstate opportunities for personal confession and absolution. The concept is thoroughly Lutheran and deserves our attention, especially where conflict is a dominant part of a congregation's culture.

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...and others

A Plainly Wrapped Gift

John Schultz

Who (Jesus), being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death – even death on a cross! Philippians 2:6-8.

You've watched children tear into the Christmas packages on Christmas Day. Which ones do they open first? The biggest one? The one with the brightest bow? Often what remains is the rather small, plainly wrapped gift, perhaps in a brown paper package because it recently came in the mail from Aunt Mable. But what a treasure was inside: a brand new, long-awaited watch!

If observed at all, the Christchild, lying in a manger, is often viewed at such a distance that he is out of focus. People have a blurred picture. How cute! A real baby in a manger surrounded by farm animals. The distractions of the pre-Christmas period often lead people, even us, away from rather than to the person in Bethlehem's manger. The Christchild can become a mythical patron saint of Christmas on a par with

Santa Claus. The holiday period, we are told, is a time in which love again reigns among men, when we should practice "Peace on earth" among people and nations. This dreadful perversion of the Gospel message of the Prince of Peace sent to the world to reconcile sinful humans with the Father clouds the Christchild in the manger. Though we Christians are not of the world, we live in the world and these and other distractions can have a serious effect on us. As servants of the Lord Jesus, we will lead our children, young people, and all others to the manger to see in that "plain paper package" the greatest treasure-gift of all.

We will invite our children and others to follow the shepherds into Bethlehem, right up close to the manger in the stable-cave and "see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about" Luke 2:15b. We will tell them of the wonderful, glorious message presented to the shepherds in a most awe-inspiring way: "a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord" Luke 2:11. What the prophets of old preached and what the believers of old had so patient-

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ly awaited had now taken place. The Lord God in great love had sent His Son “that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life” John 3:16.

As we gaze in the manger, we see the Messiah, the Christ. The final completion of mankind’s redemption was now beginning. “But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons” Galatians 4:4. It is our solemn duty as ministers of the Gospel to lead our children, young people, and all others to see over the humble manger the cross. Open the plainly-wrapped gift and reveal to all the treasure inside.

Read some more: 2 Corinthians 5:18-21

Prayer:

Come, your hearts and voices raising,
Christ the Lord with gladness praising;
Loudly sing his love amazing,
Worthy folk of Christendom.
See how God, for us providing,
Gave his Son and life abiding;
He our weary steps is guiding
From earth’s woe to heavenly joy.
Gracious Child, We pray you, hear us;
From your lowly manger cheer us.
Gently lead us and be near us
Till we join the angelic choir. Amen

CW 42 v.1,2,5

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