

“One Body, One Spirit, One Hope”
Presentation for SK Synod Convention
May 31-June 1, 2024

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Friday Evening Presentation

Introduction

I'd like to begin with a story. One Sunday morning, when people came to their church to gather for worship, they discovered, to their horror, that their sanctuary had been ransacked. Some of the beautiful, wooden pews that had been handmade by the first members of the congregation had been smashed. Other pews had been overturned. Pages had been torn out of the hymnbooks, which were scattered all over on the floor. The beautiful handmade glass bowl from the baptismal font had been smashed. The pulpit had been chopped into pieces. Graffiti had been spray-painted on the walls and on the altar.

The parishioners stood in shock as they gathered and saw the carnage all around them. They felt like they had been kicked in the gut. The worst part of all, however, was the message that had been spray-painted on the altar. The words had all run together, but given the destruction around them, the intention of the words was clear. The words taunted them saying “God is nowhere.”

“God is nowhere.” That is exactly how they felt at that moment. It felt like their church, their community of the gathered faithful, had been abandoned by God. Their cry of despair echoed that jarring statement made by Jesus himself, who had cried from the cross, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Mark 15:34). *Their* church, *their* particular incarnation of the body of Christ, represented by *their* gathering place, had been torn apart. Abandoned.

It had been bad enough for the worshipping community when the churches had to cancel gathering in person for months on end because of COVID 19. They had felt abandoned and isolated then. And now this. Just as they were trying to get things to return to normal. Where was God? Why was this happening?

The questions asked by this particular congregation are likely questions we have also asked ourselves. With everything going on, it is sometimes difficult to be optimistic about the church today. It seems that, for all intents and purposes, it is very easy to get the impression that God is nowhere—or at least, not present with us, the ELCIC, anymore. On any given Sunday morning, the average age—at least the average age of those still coming to church on any given Sunday morning—is most likely more than 60 years old. We are not a young church. And despite the fairly high standard of living that we experience here in Canada, the finances available to the church have steadily decreased. Many of the small churches in our synod

simply cannot afford pastors, and so they close or look for other alternatives. But with every change, more people fade into the background, and the available resources shrink even more. We know that. We just have to look around to see it. There are fewer members, fewer congregations, and fewer active rostered ministers in our Synod since we last gathered in convention.

COVID 19, of course, has been one of the reasons for the drop in membership, congregations, worship attendance, and the declining ability to have a full-time pastor. It is not something that we want to live through again. It forced congregations to shut their doors for a while, providing an easy way of “dropping out” of church, especially for those who were becoming disenchanted by the direction the church was going. Euphemistically, we could say that since the last in-person synod convention, we have, as the Saskatchewan Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada, “lost some weight.” And we didn’t need to lose weight!

These realities of our church make the task of being a bishop of this church even more demanding, and perhaps even impossible. Skeptics would even say that our new bishop will be called upon to preside over the funeral for our church. Even more reason, then, to continue praying each day for our upcoming bishop elect, along with our retiring bishop Sid. And while we’re at it, let’s include prayers for our own congregations and our leaders, as well as for the ELCIC, which still carries scars from the various battles it has fought in the last 25 years, and for all churches in our world. Our churches are called to be witnesses in the midst of a divided, torn, world.

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The theme of this convention, based on the theme of the 2023 Lutheran World Federation’s Assembly held in Krakow, Poland, is “One Body, One Spirit, One Hope.” The theme is taken from the letter to the Ephesian church, and which was also written to us, where we hear, “There is one body and one spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling” (Eph 4:4).

When I hear that theme, “One Body, one Spirit, One Hope,” I have a choice. I can hear it in a negative way, or I can hear those same words as powerful words of promise. How do we hear those words? And how do we want to hear those words?

If we want to hear—and even more importantly, experience!—the words, “One Body, One Spirit, One Hope” as powerful words of promise, of life, and of resurrection, however, we need to begin by doing a reality check. I am convinced that we are a people who desperately want life and resurrections, not just for ourselves and our congregations, this synod, and our church, but also for the sake of our children and our children’s children, to the third and fourth generations. We want to live, but not just live, but to thrive, to breathe in the breath of God that created us, our churches, and our world, so that we can experience life and resurrection.

So, tonight, in the sure and certain hope of life and resurrection, we need to begin with a reality check. We will begin this reality check by taking a realistic look at ourselves, as a church, and see where we miss the mark at being one body, and one in spirit, and one in hope.

But remember, this is just the starting place. It's not going to be the last word, because God won't let it be the last word. Tomorrow morning, we will focus on having one hope, and what that may mean for us, our synod, our church, our society, and God's creation. Tomorrow, we will explore, in more detail, the wonderful promise from God and God's word. For God declares to us, even though we are but a remnant of what we have been, that because of Christ, we are indeed One Body, in the One Spirit, and with One Hope.

One Body

In the twelfth chapter of the letter to the Romans and to us, St. Paul writes, "we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another" (Rom 12:5). He also says, in his first letter to the people of Corinth and to us, "Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread" (1 Cor 10:17). We are one body, for we partake of the one bread. That's the 'carved in stone reality' that God declares to us.

The trouble is, when we look around, at where we are at now, and where we have been in the past, and what is going on in our church and in our synod, it seems that our reality is different from the reality that God is describing. When we look around, we all too often see only the wreckage of 2000 years of infighting in the church and in our world. When we look around at the apparent messes that the church has always managed to create down through history, it would be easy to conclude that "God is nowhere"—at least nowhere that we can see. What we see, instead, is a fragmented church.

We are all too aware of the people and congregations near us that have left the ELCIC in the last 25 years, over one issue or another. And we have to recognize that most of the issues that have caused the church, as the body of Christ, to be torn apart, have to do with ... wait for it ... the body. Our bodies, to be precise.

At one level, our church, which is a part of the whole body of Christ, has become smaller because of disagreements over what the church, the body of Christ, should look like, and what it should be doing. On the one hand, some have withdrawn from the ELCIC because of its participation in fostering ecumenical relationships with other churches. They would argue that such relationships involve abandoning our Lutheran roots. These people, unfortunately, have clung to an ageless misconception that the Lutheran Church alone was the clearest representation of what the true church is to be like on heaven and earth. To cooperate with anyone else, then, would be to water down or dilute the one, true church. Ironically, these Lutherans aren't the only ones to entertain this misconception. Twenty some years ago, Cardinal Ratzinger, who would in 2005 become Pope Benedict XVI, suggested, perhaps with tongue in cheek, that only the Roman Catholic church was the true church, and the rest of us were just "church-like" communions, simply *playing* at being the church.

Others who have left the ELCIC have claimed that the ELCIC has replaced its commitment to the gospel with a commitment to doing justice for everyone—for everyBODY—in society. In response, however, I would argue that the ELCIC has always insisted that justice is one of the ways that people experience the gospel. But that has not stopped the exodus. And the result is that we are a fragmented body. We are not whole. We are not one.

One the other hand, there are those in our churches who have left our part of the body of Christ because they have felt that the ELCIC wasn't involved enough in ecumenism or in working for justice. In response, they have left for other, more ecumenically-minded churches that they perceive as more committed to correcting injustices in our own back yards and around the world. And an exodus, although small, continues. We cannot keep the One Body together, no matter what we do. Some will always want to leave.

If this was politics, we'd say that the One Body has been torn apart because those who left thought the church was becoming too liberal or was simply too conservative. Yet we also know that complaining about the church, and using any excuse to leave the church is always easier than putting sweat equity into working to make the church, as vulnerable as it is, a better reflection of what it means to be the One Body of Christ.

Nowhere has this been more evident than in the conflict that has arisen because of the differing views of our physical bodies. Let's be honest. We have vandalized ourselves over same sex marriages, over who can serve as a pastor to the church, and what it means to be in a life-affirming relationship with others. To put it bluntly, we've torn our body apart over sex. How ironic, since God created sexuality as an integral component of what it means to be human. In the garden of Eden, humans were created in the image of God, as physical and spiritual beings. Our humanity is intimately connected to our physical beings, beings declared to be, not just good, but "very good" (Gen 1:26-31). It is part and parcel of one of the ways for people to express how "two shall become one" (Mark 10:8). Our physical nature plays a role in reminding us of the unity needed for a community to be created in God's image. Our bodies also remind us that we are physically needed to be present if we want to continue to be a community created in God's image.

However, as a church, we sure haven't become One Body! Instead—dare I say it!—Lutherans more likely resemble "Legion, for we are many," as Mark 5:9 notes. We are a multitude of fragmented little Lutheran churches. Since the beginning of the reformation—an event meant to bring the church back to its roots, to unite the church once more in the mission and purpose God has for the church—the church, the One Body of Christ, has become ever more divided. It has not become united into the one body, sharing the one bread. Even though God has created all things and declared them "good" or even "very good," we've spent a lot of time dividing the church instead of multiplying the one church, the body of Christ. And, in doing so, we have, to put it nicely, made a mess of things.

But before we begin to just blame ourselves, we need to remember that it is not just the ELCIC that has been left fragmented. The problem is bigger than that. Every denominational body in western Europe and North America has been affected. The church, as viewed from a distance, is broken. It is not One Body. It is not united, despite the best efforts of ecumenism, of working with other churches. If we are honest with ourselves, the ELCIC and the whole Christian Church, in all times and all places, is not the "one body," that St. Paul had confidently claimed and envisioned. Instead, we're fractured and broken.

How fractured are we? According to recent studies of religion, there are at least 30,000 different Christian denominations in North America alone, and over 45,000 Christian denominations in the world. And those numbers deal only with *Christian* denominations! It

doesn't include all the religious movements that have sprung up and have split from the teachings of the Christian church. That's absurd!

And yet we dare to say, "we are one body." On the one hand, we should be embarrassed saying it! We have split over how we interpret the Bible. We have split over racism, ethnicity, gender—you name it. The list goes on and on. On the other hand, however, to claim that, despite all appearances, we are One Body, is to make a strong and profound statement of faith: we are proclaiming that it is God who makes us One Body. That is our defining reality.

It's not just the church, but society itself that has been torn apart by discrimination and prejudices of all kinds. In many ways, we could describe our society as playing a perpetual game of "king of the castle." Remember that playground game? The goal, in blunt terms, was to climb over everyone else to get to the top, to be the ruler of the castle. You were to do whatever was necessary to come out on top. But we have discovered, over time, that the easiest, or quickest way to get to the top of the heap was to treat everyone else as less than human. Even the name of this game is patriarchal, rather than affirming for all. Being queen of the castle was still a step down from being at the top, where the "king" sat. In playing this game, moreover, we justified to ourselves all kinds of injustices. The end result, being the "top dog" (notice that I didn't say, "top human"), justifies our actions—or so we claim. But in doing so, we end up acting as less than human ourselves, while at the same time treating others as less than human.

Martin Luther called the attempts to win the game, King of the Castle at all costs as sin. Since he saw the results of this game in his own time, he reminded his people, again and again, that God had created ways to counteract this impulse to try rule over others. Thus, one of the main tasks for government was to create just and fair laws in society so that nobody would be treated as less than human. In the same way, one of the main roles of the law in the spiritual realm was to prevent people from trying to be more than human, to try to be gods in God's place. For God has created us—each and every one of us—in God's own image. And if that weren't enough, God has also shown us, by the way Christ Jesus lived on earth, what it means to be fully human—the very thing that God has created us to be.

Instead, of living in the way Christ lived on earth, however, we opt for playing "king of the castle." As a result, we keep tearing ourselves apart by endorsing segregation, displacement, racism, and climate change, among other things, even if we "dress them up in fancy clothes." In the process, however, we've starved both the church and society of the life-giving breath that God keeps wanting to breathe into us to bring us alive and keep us alive and thriving. Instead, we are choking. We can't breathe, just as George Floyd could not breathe. The people climbing over us, you see, have to put their knees on our necks in order to get to the top.

The images I've just described are not pretty pictures. Our world has been busy tearing apart the body, the community, society, while at the same time destroying the earth for the sake of getting to the top of the heap. And even though the church describes sin as the tearing apart of everything in its path in order to get to the top, it doesn't make it any easier to explain our actions to the world. We are not One Body. Explanations about how the church is one body make as much sense as trying to explain to non-Christians that God the Father,

God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit equals one God. How does $1+1+1=1$? And yet we celebrated this confusing new math last Sunday, which is called Trinity Sunday.

When we gather to worship, we also recognized that, contrary to what Paul says, we cannot all partake of the one bread, the body of Christ, given to us in the Lord's Supper. Some Christians aren't allowed to take communion in some churches because they are not members of that church, or they are the wrong colour, the wrong ethnic group, the wrong gender, or not competent enough, according to the that church's gatekeepers.

So much for being "one body" in Christ. The church, as the one body in Christ, has never been a reality. Splitting up is one thing the church has been very good at. Tearing apart the body of Christ is not something new for the church. We've had lots of practice. It's not a new phenomenon. Let me take you back in history for a few examples.

We begin in the year 55, in the Common Era. The young church is less than 25 years old. Yet it is in danger of falling apart before it even gets fully established. The church is still in flux, between being a part, or a 'new wing' of the Jewish faith, or developing a new identity. The problem? Membership. On the one hand, many of the original followers of Jesus, who happened to have been Jewish, want to keep this "Jesus Movement," as some called it, or "The Way," to themselves. After all, it was to them that Jesus appeared. It was to the people of Israel that God had promised the Messiah. They saw themselves as the specially chosen of God. If you weren't Jewish, but wanted to be a member of their exclusive club, you had to be circumcised as a man. And as for women, well, they could be "associate members" only if they were married to a qualified man. It wasn't really an "equals" arrangement.

There was another group that was also insisting that they had a right to belong to the Jesus movement or the Way. Paul (who was previously known as Saul, before he had some sort of vision problems caused by a strange experience while hunting down these radical new believers), was claiming that the "Way" should be open to everyone, Jew or non-Jew. So he argued for the inclusion of those who were labelled "Gentiles" (the non-Jews). They insisted that everyone could belong to the church, whether they were Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male or female. And, by the way, they insisted that males should not have to be circumcised in order to join. They ruled out cut rate admissions, so to speak.

Well, as you can imagine, these two groups argued ferociously with each other, each side claiming to be right, each side claiming that they best understood God and God's word. And finally, at a convention in Jerusalem, perhaps similar to this convention, the matter was settled. Jews would not require Gentiles to become circumcised in order to belong to this new thing called the church. But the Gentiles were required to financially support the Jewish worshippers in Jerusalem, who were facing more and more restrictions from their Roman occupiers. Even then, however, mistrust remained. Paul's group was looked upon with suspicion. So much for being "one body" in Christ. You could cut the tension between them with a knife.

Let's skip ahead about a thousand years. The year is 1054. On a fine summer day, an ambassador from the Pope in Rome goes to the main church in Istanbul (then known as Constantinople), which was the main church for the eastern part of the Christian Church. In the middle of the Communion service, the Pope's ambassador walks up to the altar and places a letter from the Pope on the altar. This letter declared that the eastern part of the

church, which later becomes known as the Orthodox Church, had been kicked out of the “One, True Church,” which was, according to the letter, what later became known as the western, or “Roman Catholic Church.” Not to be outdone, the Patriarch, who was the equivalent to the Pope in the eastern, or Orthodox Church, sent his ambassador to Rome with a letter declaring that the western Church was kicked out of the “One, True Church.” Tit for tat.

These two ambassadorial actions lead to the first major split within the Christian Church. There are lots of reasons for this split. They disagreed on things like Icons, and the wording of the Nicene Creed. In particular, they disagreed over whether the Holy Spirit proceeded from the Father *and* the Son, or whether the Spirit proceeded from the Father *through* the Son. They split over the addition of three words “and the son,” or, in Latin, *Filioque*. It became known as the *filioque* clause. But it was not just this phrase in the creed that caused the One Body to split. The different languages they used in worship and in everyday life, also created misunderstandings. The Orthodox church spoke Greek, while the Roman church spoke Latin. And as we now know, different languages express similar things in different ways. Confusion can develop when these ideas are translated into another language. All these things factored into the splitting of the One Body into the Orthodox Church and the Roman Catholic Church nearly a thousand years ago. So much for being “one body” in Christ.

Now skip ahead 500 years. The year is 1517. A parish pastor and monk, who taught at the local university in the ‘backwoods’ of Germany, had heard that another monk, named Johannes Tetzel, was selling pieces of paper that promised Christians that they could avoid time in purgatory for themselves or for their loved ones. In the teaching of the church at that time, purgatory was the place Christians went after death to be purified, or cleansed, from *the stains caused by their sin* (which was already forgiven!) before they could enter heaven. Non-Christians, on the other hand, went straight to hell. Going to purgatory, then, was a good thing! It meant that you were saved, and that you would eventually get to heaven. Purgatory was seen as a good place, because it was where the Christians were “purged” of the stains created by sin and thus made holy so that they were worthy of entering heaven. Thus, the name, “purgatory.” It was sort of like a spiritual “drive-through car wash,” where you came out purified and clean at the other end, with no stains left. But purgatory was also not a place you wanted to spend a lot of time in. It was a “fiery furnace” type of place. Recognizing that, the church came up with a way for its faithful believers to avoid purgatory, while conveniently enriching itself at the same time. The church thus made it possible for you to buy what was called an indulgence letter, a document that gave you a “free pass,” straight into heaven, bypassing purgatory altogether. These indulgence letters were even marketed with a nice little jingle for their advertising campaign “When the coin in the collection box clings, the soul from purgatory springs.”

Upset with this blatant selling of “getting out of purgatory free” cards, the parish pastor, monk, and professor protested to his bishop. And that protest snowballed into a re-examination of the church and its authority. The parish pastor, monk and university professor, was thrown out of the church, in order to preserve the unity of the one body of Christ, the church. But the sad result was that within a couple of decades, this one body, the church, was torn apart again. Now, not only was there a Roman Catholic Church and an Orthodox church, but now, there was a “Protestant” church, which, in fact, was actually a

collection of churches, consisting of Anabaptists, Reformed, Lutherans, Baptists, Moravians, and others. And the descendants of that parish pastor, monk, and professor, named Martin Luther, are still blamed by many within the body of Christ, as the “ones who split the church.”

So much for being “one body” in Christ. And we are a part of the resulting fragmentation. As one church historian commented, “every 500 years, since Christ’s death and resurrection, the church has been torn apart by a major rupture. And I’m here to remind you that it has now been 500 years since the reformation tore the church apart. It looks like we are succeeding in our 500th anniversary project of further splitting the church. But to be honest, we didn’t wait 500 years before launching the next project to tear apart the church. Our history, as a church, is replete with other examples.

For example, in the early 1860s, the civil war erupted in the United States, largely over the question about the legitimacy of slaves. We have also been torn apart, as have other churches, because of differing views about the inerrancy of the Bible, and because of differing views of ordaining people who are not males. Or think about the time here in Saskatchewan, in the early 1900s, when a local Lutheran congregation was split apart because the visiting pastor wanted to serve *Äpfelschnitzel* (apples slices) for communion, because there was no bread at the church that particular Sunday.¹ Wherever an excuse was to be found, the church could tear itself apart!

It was no wonder, then, that the three major Lutheran church bodies in Canada, back in the late 1970s and early 1980s, had to give up plans for creating one, unified Lutheran church in Canada. They simply couldn’t agree on issues such as the inerrancy of scripture or the ordination of women. As a result, the merger failed.

So much for being “one body in Christ.” What God has joined together, we have torn apart. And the reason the body has been torn apart is because of us. God isn’t the one who is leading the charge to tear apart the one body. We are. We can’t blame God.

And yet, despite all the failures we have had in trying to be one body in Christ, in our creeds and in our worship, we continue to believe, teach, and confess that, despite everything, we are the church, a part of the One Body of Christ.

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Thankfully, God hasn’t given up on us, despite our failure to be one body. On the contrary, God still insists, and God continues to declare, that the true and abiding reality is that we are One Body. That is how God sees it. And as a result, God continues calling us to be “One Body” in Christ. And not only is God *calling* us to be the One Body in Christ, but God is also *making* us one body. God continues to hold before us the vision of “one body,” joined together, not by our efforts, but by the power of God’s Word. When God speaks, things happen, as we are constantly reminded by Scripture. When God speaks, creation happens, as

¹ Norman J. Threinen, *A Sower Went Out: A History of the Manitoba and Saskatchewan District of the Lutheran Church-Canada (Missouri Synod)*z, (Regina: Manitoba and Saskatchewan District, 1982), 18.

the first chapter of Genesis reminds us. When God speaks, the dry bones that Ezekiel saw in the valley are brought together. God is in the business of bringing things together into one body, through Christ and through the Holy Spirit. That is God's reality. Pure and simple. We are One Body, regardless of what it looks like to human eyes.

We get a glimpse of what the One Body in Christ looks like in the many parables that Jesus told the disciples and the people of his time who were tired of being divided by politics, religion, and any other number of reasons. In the parables, Jesus talks about the "reign of God," and what that looks like. In each instance, the reign of God is about unity: unity between God and humans, unity between God, humanity, and all creation, and unity between people. In the parables he told, and which are repeated to us over and over again, families are reunited, ethnic divisions are broken down, and religious differences are overcome. God is constantly shaping all people into the One Body of Christ, in which all peoples and all creation are gathered together into Christ. God is calling us, through Christ, to finally drop our grand plans to be "rulers of the castle" at the expense of others, and to instead become One Body, joined together in such a way that we become, finally, what God had envisioned for us: One Body.

So how does the church become this one body of Christ that God has envisioned for us, and how can we become a life-giving community that lives as this One Body in our divided world? We know we can't do it by ourselves, that's for sure. We've seen where that leads us. But there is a way for it to happen. It is a way that God alone can provide. And that is through the One Spirit. The Spirit of God.

One Spirit

When God created the heavens and the earth, God took a piece of clay, molded it into the shape of a human being, and breathed into it. It became One Body. At that moment, what had been merely clay became "inspired"—breathed into. With that one breath, that "creative wind," as the first chapter of Genesis describes it life is given.² It's not a coincidence that the word for Spirit in Hebrew is also the same word as breath. The One Spirit of God, breathed into us, gives life. The Spirit, or the "wind from God," swept over the face of the waters" of creation, according to Genesis 1:2, breathing life into what was previously a "formless void" (Gen 1:1).

But the Spirit of God doesn't stop with just breathing life into us and all creation—as if that weren't enough to keep the Holy Spirit busy! Rather, the Spirit breathes life into us for very specific purposes. This task, part of the Holy Spirit's job description, is one that we have become aware of, in a new way, in the last 30 years: to bring about reconciliation between bodies that have been torn apart by sin and self-centredness, by engaging, all too willingly, in a game of "king of the castle." That aptly described the colonial approach often exercised in North America. Bringing about reconciliation is a huge task in a broken world. But that is a central part of the job description of the Holy Spirit.

² Ární Daniélsson, ed., *One Body, One Spirit, One Hope: Study Guide* (Warsaw: Augustana Publishing House, 2023), 36.

For example, when the One Spirit was breathed into Mary, she conceived and bore Christ, who is described as the “firstborn,” the one who came to reconcile “all creation” to himself (2 Cor 5:19). In the waters of the Jordan River, the Spirit of God was present as the voice from heaven described how Jesus was sent to prepare the way for the good news, or gospel, of the reconciliation of all creation (Mark 1:1-3). And on the cross, Jesus reconciled all people with God by dying for our sins and rising to new life. In rising to life from the dead, Christ Jesus reconciled us by bringing all creation, lingering in death, back to life.

There is an obstacle in the way, however, of the Spirit’s work in breathing life into us and bringing us alive for the world, even while we continue to hide behind the closed doors and thick walls of the church. We are not always sure what is the one, true, Holy Spirit, and what are the false spirits. We desperately need to have the Holy Spirit breathe into us, and not some other spirit. When people are not breathing in the one same, Holy Spirit, they can hardly expect to be one unified body. Some are not having the breath of life breathed into them, and as a result, people are also breathing in death, decay, and disease. And that is a problem. We’ve been breathing in a lot of toxic air, which sucks the air out of us. But that isn’t the end of the story. We don’t roll over and give up. Why? Because we believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and Life-giver” as Luther said in his translation of the Nicene Creed.³

When we think about it, we make some very bold statements, as a church, when we confess the Apostles’ and Nicene Creeds, Sunday after Sunday. One of the bold statements we make each Sunday is when we declare that we believe in the One, Holy Spirit. We are confessing belief in the life-giving Spirit of God. But we don’t stop there. We then confess that we believe that this One Holy Spirit is being breathed into the church, the body of Christ, with the intent of gathering the fractured church together and bringing that church alive, through the forgiveness of sins and the resurrection of the body. Wow! Those are huge claims!

I wonder if we believe it, though. For in our daily lives, there are many spirits at work—many false spirits—who want us to believe them. When we do believe these false spirits, we further divide the church. No wonder John writes a letter to the church, telling them to “test the spirits to see whether they are from God” (1 John 4:1). How do we do this testing, however? John the letter writer provides the answer: “every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God” (1 John 4:2–3). It sounds simple.

However, it’s not that simple. In fact, as one colleague often says, “it’s more complicated than that.” Because of the brokenness of the One Body, the church, *and* the brokenness of the world, there are many cries that are whispered into God’s ears, coming from the spirits of individuals and of communities that have been broken. And sometimes, the broken spirits are the result of self-serving, or misleading theologies. The study document of the 2023 LWF Assembly in Krakow, Poland, put it this way:

Misleading theologies are those that misrepresent the proper work of the Holy Trinity or violate the dignity of humans and all creation, create, or perpetuate injustices, or misinterpret and abuse powers or authorities. ... they “hold people captive within a narrowly defined understanding of

³ The Second Confession, or the Nicene Creed, 7. BC 23.

themselves and the church,” [and as a result, they] underwrite many abuses of power in the political and social realm.⁴

Bad theologies lead to bad practices, which in turn lead to cries of anguish arising from the spirits of God’s people and God’s communities. There is a reason the Lutheran Church, therefore, has supported rigorous seminary training, so that misleading theologies, such as the prosperity gospel, for example, are not our identifying mark. The prosperity gospel, present in many churches, teaches that material wealth, along with the economic power it brings, is a sure sign that we are the true believers, while those who cannot escape poverty or oppression have a lack of faith. But the Scriptures are full of examples of how faithfulness cannot be measured by our wealth or lack of it.

We know a different truth, however. We know that the One Spirit of God “intercedes with groanings too deep for words” (Rom 8:26) for those who cannot free themselves from the cycles of injustice that won’t let go of them. However, those who think they don’t need the intercession of the One Spirit of God because everything is okay in their world, don’t need the Holy Spirit to utter groans too deep for words on their behalf. Such an attitude shows that they are not of the “One Spirit,” but are of another spirit. If they were of the One Spirit, they would not be tearing apart the One Body.

Faced with this sobering reality, no wonder we as the church utter a cry to the Holy Spirit, echoing St. Paul, by saying “Who will rescue us from this wretched body of death?” (Rom 7:24). Of course, St. Paul asked this as a rhetorical question. He knew the answer, but he wants each generation to figure it out as well. Paul’s answer was simple: “Thanks be to God through our Lord Jesus Christ!” (Rom 7:25). It is Christ who will rescue us! We don’t have to rescue ourselves—as if we even could! No, what makes us One body and One Spirit is God alone. Because of what Christ does, and has done for us, we are brought together by the Holy Spirit into One Body with One Spirit and One Hope. On our own, we can’t even believe in God, let alone make the body of Christ one in Spirit. But with Christ, all things are possible.

St. Paul was not the only one who thought this way. In his Small Catechism, while explaining the third article of the creed, Martin Luther said this:

I believe that by my own understanding or strength I cannot believe in Jesus Christ my LORD or come to him, but instead the Holy Spirit has called me through the gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, made me holy and kept me in the true faith, just as he calls, gathers, enlightens, and makes holy the whole Christian church on earth and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one common, true faith.⁵

We need the One Spirit, the One Holy Spirit of God, to believe in Jesus Christ, to trust in Christ, and to confess that Jesus Christ is our LORD. Apart from this Holy Spirit of God, we end up running “madly off in all directions,” as Lorne Elliott’s radio show on CBC was entitled. We run madly off in all directions, chasing whatever spirit we think will give us what we want. But Luther made it clear that only in the One Spirit of God, the “Holy” Spirit, can we find unity. For it is not us, but the Holy Spirit who brings the church together in unity. This Spirit “calls,

⁴ Daniélsson, *One Body, One Spirit, One Hope*, 33–34.

⁵ SC Creed, Article 3, 6; BC, 355–356.

gathers, enlightens, and makes holy the whole Christian church on earth and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one common, true faith.” The job of the Holy Spirit is to bring the church together, into one body. The problem is, we keep trying to put the Holy Spirit out of work. Like little kids, we keep saying, “I can do it myself.” And we’ve all cleaned up lots of messes after those experiments! And instead of cleaning house, getting rid of the false spirit that divide us, the false spirit then goes and invites even more false spirits to come with it, as Jesus described it in Luke 11 (24–26).

Even when we as a church are called, gathered, enlightened and made holy and are molded into one body by the one Spirit, there are other challenges ahead of us. One of the challenges that we face as a church is that we often confuse having one, common spirit with everyone being exactly the same. But to be of One Spirit does not mean there is no room for diversity. In fact, it’s the opposite. Diversity is one of the greatest gifts of the One Spirit, for it allows us to be One Body, equipped by a multitude of gifts and perspectives, to face all the challenges coming at us in the world. In fact, because we are of one spirit, thanks to the workings of the Holy Spirit, we are opened to a world of incredible diversity.

St. Paul reminds us that although we are to be one body in Christ, sharing the one spirit, we are given many gifts. In the letter to the Roman church and to us, he declares, “For as in one body we have many members, ... not all the members have the same function” (Rom 12:4). Not everyone can be the eyes of the neighbourhood. Not everyone can be the hands or the feet. If everyone were the same part of the body, and if everyone did the same things, there would be no one body. You’d just have giant eyeballs, or tongues, or arms flopping around, being totally useless. Instead, a great deal of diversity is essential if we want to be One Body. With this great diversity of members and functions and gifts, we are equipped by God to “drink of the one Spirit” (1 Cor 12:13). Drinking deeply of the water of life that is provided us leads to a great diversity in the one body, united by the one spirit.

But it doesn’t end there. In fact, every gift and every skill that is given to us by the Spirit is to be used to serve the one body. As Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians 12:27–31:

Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers; then deeds of power, then gifts of healing, forms of assistance, forms of leadership, various kinds of tongues. Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret?

Of course, Paul wasn’t asking us these questions because he didn’t know the answers. Rather, they were rhetorical questions, and the answer was obvious: “Of course not!” Of course, not all of us are apostles or prophets or leaders, or givers of aid or teachers or miracles workers or healers. That would be absurd, and it would be very dysfunctional. A church couldn’t operate if everyone did the same thing or had the same gifts! It needs a diversity of gifts and a diversity of people. And, just as importantly, the Spirit of God deliberately does not give any one individual all of these gifts. If that were to happen, they wouldn’t need the rest of the body, and the church would be running off madly in all directions again.

Thus, after asking his rhetorical questions, Paul reminds the congregation in Corinth, a congregation that was in danger of splitting apart, and chasing after multiple spirits, that at the core of being One Body and having One Spirit was one thing that every member of the body was called to do: practice the gift of love. We have been called to exercise our gifts and make use of our skills in a spirit of love. In fact, this is so important that Jesus made it a commandment. In the Gospel of John, for example, he said “This is my commandment, that you love one another” on three separate occasions (John 13:14; 15:12; 15:17). Jesus didn’t say, love only those who are just like you, or love only those who are friendly and nice to you. Instead, love thrives and blossoms in the very midst of diversity and uniqueness. It is the crucial ingredient needed in working through disagreements. Love is the glue that holds the one body together. And in a world that seems to be falling apart, fueled by a distrust or even hatred for those who are different, those who are vulnerable, and those who get in the way of people who want to climb to the top of the heap, we need to hear a new voice, a voice that unites rather than divides, a voice that speaks love to the world.

Today, for our people and our churches who feel they have been abandoned by God and are ready to give up, for churches who are tired of the struggles and fights that have torn them apart, feeling like their way forward has become nothing more than steps inching ever closer to an empty grave, we need a word of the Lord that speaks resurrection, a word that speaks life, a word that heals, a word that brings the one body together again, where they can be of one spirit, one Holy Spirit breathing life into all.

There are prophets, old and new, who are speaking these words of life into our world of war and division and mistrust. And the prophets who speak, inspired by the one, Holy Spirit, remind us that the greatest gift the Spirit of God gives us, is love. Love for those who are not like us. Love that can give someone freezing in the cold a coat and a place to warm up. Love that seeks the best for others, rather than looking for ways to get them out of our way.

But who are those prophets today? Well, sometimes, those prophetic voices come from the most unexpected places or people, as people exercise their gifts. One of those voices is Jackie DeShannon, who first recorded a 1965 song written by Burt Bacharach and Hal David. It is a song that we probably all recognize: “What the world needs now, is love, sweet love, It’s the only thing that there’s just too little of. ... What the world needs now is love, sweet love, no, not just for some, but for ... everyone.”⁶ That is as true today as it was in 1965. Sure, it’s a simplistic, corny song. But the message is one that comes from the lips of the One Spirit, a message directed to the people who are called to be one body in this one Spirit. That Spirit asks us, where is the love that sings with one spirit, to a world that hates?

Many would see this call to love as an unrealistic pipe dream, because that is not the way our world operates. But aren’t we tired of operating that old way, in which people try to control other people and, when they can’t control others, they leave destruction in their wake? Is that the kind of life that God intended for us? I don’t think so. In fact, the Word of the Lord makes it clear that we know that the way of division, hatred, and decay is not God’s way. This way of division is the way of the false prophets, people who seek power by treating

⁶ Songwriters: Burt Bacharach / Hal David. *What The World Needs Now Is Love*. Lyrics © BMG Rights Management, Universal Music Publishing Group.

others as less than human on their quest to becoming gods in God's place. But the way of these prophets is not what God intends for our world. Rather, God's Word is very clear that the Spirit of the Lord is always seeking to bring about the unity of the One Body, the community, our world. And that requires love for each other. That requires respect for each other, despite how different they may be from us. It requires recognizing that God loves diversity in our world. God didn't just create one kind of tree, for example. Instead, God created a multitude of trees, a multitude of animals, multitude of ideas and colours and dreams, all contributing to the rich diversity of the world God created "in the beginning." Rich diversity is a marker of God's vision for the world.

We already know, in our hearts, that we are not of one spirit when we turn up our noses at others or when we shun or even ignore others who are not like us. We are not of one spirit when we do not have love. We become nothing more than noisy gongs, which does nothing for the community except give them headaches and drive everyone insane.

But the Spirit of the Lord sings a new song to us. In Christ Jesus, we are made the one body as we partake of the one bread and drink of the one cup, called to the table by the one Holy Spirit. Even though we have messed up again and again and have caused the One Body to be torn apart, that is not the end of the story. God continues to bring about the one Body through the calling of the One Spirit. God is making things happen. And that creates hope, even in a shattered world. And that hope, created by God, is what we will look at tomorrow.

“One Body, One Spirit, One Hope”
Presentation for SK Synod Convention
May 31-June 1, 2024

Saturday Morning Presentation

One Hope

Last night, we explored the first two parts of the theme for our convention, “One Body and One Spirit.” I suggested that, as a church, from the congregational to its national, and even international expressions, we are called to be the One Body of Christ. But a brief tour through history, and a brief reflection on what is happening around us at the present time, has revealed that we seem to be better at fragmenting the church than we have at making it one body. For at least the last 500 years, Lutherans, along with all the other churches, have shown their aptitude for tearing the church apart with our infighting, all in the name of God. And we have torn apart the church most often by fighting over issues related to the Body, and specifically, our physical bodies.

Today, as a result of a virus that has viciously attacked physical bodies in the last four years, our churches look differently from what they did the last time we gathered in person at a Synod Convention, way back in 2018. Since then, everything seems to be in flux. For example, the carved-in-stone 10am or 11am worship services every Sunday look different now than they did ten, or even five years ago—if they are even meeting on Sunday mornings anymore.

On top of that, the pandemic forced churches into developing new ways to worship within weeks of COVID 19’s eruption. Who would have thought five years ago that going to church might mean pulling up a chair in front of the computer monitor? Because of the pandemic, we were faced with choices: either joining in a worship service on the internet, or having no communal worship services at all. Of course, it also meant that we could anonymously “church hop”—go to different churches every Sunday from the comfort of our homes. New opportunities suddenly opened to us.

But this new reality of the post-COVID 19 pandemic has also caused nightmares for our churches, who are looking for stability in the midst of the new reality. And the changes forced upon us by this pandemic have allowed new challenges to come to the fore, from how to celebrate communion through the internet to questions about church finances. For example, how can congregations pay the bills when the offering plate isn’t being passed around in everyone’s living room every Sunday? COVID 19 simply accelerated the changes that had been taking place.

As a result, some congregations, have been forced to “close up shop.” Others have been forced, by economic realities or demographics, to create new parish alignments, even with congregations which they had never really had ever worked with before. Many of us are entering into those new arrangements with discouragement, regretting what has been lost,

rather than having excitement about the possibilities a new future may bring. Some are simply giving up in despair.

One church that perhaps has even more right to give up in despair than us is the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land (ELCJHL). Pastor Azar, their Bishop, recently wrote a column in his church's newsletter. He talked about what it is like, living in a war zone as an Arab Christian. One of the consequences of the war in Gaza, which erupted last October, and has gone on for eight months now, has been the creation of a multitude of orphans. The bishop noted that the Lutheran Church in Palestine and the Holy Land had just recently managed to evacuate 200 newly orphaned 5–7-year-old children from Rafah, in Gaza. He said that before they have even crossed the border, the newly emptied spaces in the orphanages in Rafah were already filled. Meanwhile, the church has had to find schools and homes for the 200 orphans they had managed to evacuate. He also described how, because of the war, people in shops owned by Jews would no longer talk to him, a Christian, and how his Muslim neighbours are no longer inviting him to celebrate Ramadan with them, unlike in days past. On top of that, because of the war, tourism is non-existent, meaning that a majority of their church members, who have run bakeries, souvenir shops, or travel agencies, or those who drove buses for decades, are now without work, putting even more pressure on families and the community. As a result, many families, when given the chance, have left. Looking at their situation in Gaza, they asked themselves, "Where is the hope in this situation?" Not seeing any hope for a peaceful outcome, they have left the only world they knew, for an unknown future.

In hearing his story, I suspect that in the darkest moments, the bishop has felt that God is nowhere—at least nowhere in the destruction and carnage that lays everywhere around him. In the holy places where our Lord walked, taught, healed the sick, and gave the people glimpses of what God's realm could look like, it seems that the God who had visited them and lived with them in the flesh has now abandoned them, just as hope had abandoned them.

And yet, ... and yet, despite the warfare and devastation that has erupted around him, Bishop Azar still has hope. He knows that it is not humans, but God, who has the last word. And even more importantly, this final word from God is a word of life, a word of resurrection, a word on which hope is firmly grounded. Even though he and millions of others in Gaza, Palestine, and Israel can resonate with the cry from the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?", they have not given up hope.

They are not alone in not giving up hope. The same goes for those who face the brunt of the suffering caused by the wars and conflicts in the Ukraine, in Sudan and South Sudan, in Syria, in Myanmar, in the Koreas, and, unfortunately, in a multitude of other places. There are people in all these places who have not given up hope. Nor have the families of missing and murdered Indigenous women and residential school survivors given up hope. They cling to a hope that, after all the empty promises have been cleared away, justice will indeed be done. And they are not going to give up until that justice happens. They still have hope, a sure and certain hope.

Those who hang on to this sure and certain hope, in the midst of everything, are making a statement for the world to hear. They are boldly stating that they don't want to

study war anymore. They know that the Spirit of God is going to blow through their land like a strong prairie wind in the springtime. And they know that it is going to happen. The One Spirit of God is going to breathe into all creatures and all creation, to give life, not death, peace, and not war. And they know, without a doubt, that this is indeed going to happen. This is what God has promised. So they cling to hope, and not to despair. They are not giving up on hope. They are not giving up on God's promises. For they know that whatever God promises is, indeed, going to happen. God's word changes things.

As people of God, however, we realize that we, as a church and as a society, haven't delivered on the hopes of those who are experiencing what it means to live in tombs, not of their own making. We have to admit that we have not brought peace to those living in the lands of darkness. At times, it even seems that even when we try to do things to give people more hope, all we do is throw more fuel on the fire.

It would be easy, then, given all our human failures to bring about a lasting hope, to just throw in the towel, to turn our backs on the wilderness landscapes we are living in, and call it a day. But we don't have that privilege, and we don't have that right, because whenever we are tempted to throw in the towel, a voice comes to us, calling from the wilderness. This voice calling us is the voice of God. We are called, by God, to be One Body. And so, we double our efforts to help the church grow, to get rid of injustices in our world. And when that doesn't work, we try even harder, yet without good results. We run up against a wall, and we can't go any further. We've tried our darndest.

But in times such as these, including at the present time right now, we need to be reminded once again by God that hope is not something we create for ourselves. Trying to create an authentic, viable hope by doubling or tripling our efforts is like pulling ourselves up out of the mud by our bootstraps. We all know that saying, yet have you ever tried to pull yourself out of a muddy garden or mud patch by tugging on the tops of your rubber boots while standing on them? That's just foolishness and sheer stupidity! If you try to do this, the most likely result is that you will lose your balance and fall, with no grace whatsoever, into the mud, getting totally covered in the process. At least, that's what happened to me when I first tried it as a little kid, after overhearing some adults in our community saying that a person should pull themselves up by their bootstraps. Believe me, I know it doesn't work!

The truth is, we cannot, "by our own effort or understanding," create hope any more than we can become the One Body of Christ or bring about justice in the world by our own effort or understanding. And when we realize this, our temptation is to simply give up, withdraw from the world, and seek to foster a private, personal piety or spirituality in our own little world. Maybe we can find hope there.

But realizing that we cannot create a sustained, concrete hope by our own efforts or understandings is not a reason to despair! Rather, it is the starting point for a real, authentic hope. It pushes us out of our navel-gazing despair and forces us to look elsewhere, to look for the One who can do what we cannot. What is required is the One Spirit, namely, the Holy Spirit, to "call, gather, enlighten, and make holy the whole Christian Church"—the Body!—on earth, and to "keep it with Jesus Christ in the one, common, true faith."⁷ Only through the Holy

⁷ SC, Creeds, Article 3, 6; BC 355–56.

Spirit can we be one body, with one spirit, focussed on proclaiming and living the gospel. That is the hope that is given to us by the God of life.

That is the hope we need. Despite what we see unfolding around us, we are called by God to see this time of uncertainty, this time of not knowing what we should do next, not as a time for despair or for giving up on everything, but as a time of hope and new possibilities. Yes, it is true that we are in a time of chaos, where everything that we thought was secure is falling apart. But this time of chaos and change is the ideal time for hope to develop—as long as we remember that hope is not something we can create for ourselves. It is something that God gives us. It is one of the gifts of the Holy Spirit.

Hope is a gift. Hope is not something we earn through hard work or by conjuring up our powers of positive thinking. No, hope is not based on what we do, or what we promise to do. Those promises all too often lead to disappointment. Rather, this “sure and certain” hope arises out of the “affirmation that God is faithful, that God will complete what God has begun. ... It is an ‘active waiting’ for God’s purposes to be fulfilled,”⁸ even as we pray, “your will be done on earth, as it is in heaven.” Our hope is based on what God is doing on earth, and heaven. And the cornerstone of this lasting, eternal hope, as the hymn says, is “built on nothing less than Jesus’ blood and righteousness.”⁹ Or, to put it another way, Jesus Christ alone is our foundation for hope and life.

So if hope is something that we don’t control or create by our own efforts, then how can we reliably and realistically experience hope? After all, we’re not particularly eager to enter into the midst of the chaos of our world. How, then, do we experience hope? We could ask Martin Luther that question. Through the words of Scripture, and through his own experiences of the gospel, he held a sure and certain hope that God was bringing about a new creation in his world, and in his church. God initiated the reformation, he reminded people. It was not because of his work or effort. In fact, perhaps with tongue in cheek, Luther claimed that the reformation happened while he and his friends Philip Melancthon and Nikolaus von Amsdorf simply slept and drank Wittenberg beer. According to Luther’s account, he and his friends basically pulled up some lawn chairs and watched God work. They watched as God used the Word to weaken the foundation of a church built on sand, while the new church, built on the solid rock who is Christ, was revealed in its place. Luther then noted that, as for bringing about the Reformation, “I did nothing; the Word did everything.”¹⁰ Now, I’m not suggesting that we cancel the rest of the synod convention and just go and drink beer, trusting God to do all the work!

The story does remind us, however, that Luther felt that his world was in chaos. He felt that they were in the end times. But still he had hope. He had hope, even when Satan would whisper in his ear, “How can you alone be right?” From Luther’s own writings, we know that he faced severe doubts and experienced great despair. But he stubbornly clung onto the one hope that had been given him by God. God would not forsake or abandon him. God was bringing about a new creation, where people can find life, not because they tried

⁸ Daniélsson, *One Body, One Spirit, One Hope*, 47.

⁹ “My Hope is Built on Nothing Less,” *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, # 596.

¹⁰ “Invocavit Sermons (1522),” LW 51:77.

hard enough, but because God has decisively acted. He clung to that One Hope, because it contained the promises of God, the promises of forgiveness of sin, life, and salvation. And he had hope, because not only did God promise those things, he knew that God was acting to make them a reality.

We could ask Martin Luther King, Jr. where he got his hope. He hoped because he knew God's promises. He knew that because God promised to bring about justice in the world, that it is going to happen. He knew, deep in his heart, that God was going to, one day, bring about a world where his "four little children [would] one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character," as he said in his famous speech in Washington, D.C. in August of 1963. His hope in God's promises of justice and equality for all gave him the courage to believe that one day, everyone would be singing together, as one body, "Free at last. Free at last. Thank God almighty, we are free at last." He knew that God is at work bringing about a new creation, even in the midst of chaos, and even in the midst of the wildernesses of life. His family continued to trust in this promise, even after he was assassinated in 1968. He had put his trust and hope in a God that promised to bring about justice and equality among all people, a world where there was indeed One Body created by the One Spirit. He knew it was going to happen, because God has promised it. And so he had hope.

The civil rights movement in the United States was a challenge to the status quo. It revealed to society that people do not handle challenges well. In that situation, and those situations today that are similar to it, those who have a lot to lose vigorously fight the proposals, while those who gain hope from concrete changes embrace it. Friction and conflict arise whenever a prophet calls for changes, especially when those changes give freedom and equality to all people and all creation. But we can never use the threat of conflict to support a status quo that is unjust and against the longed-for and needed new creation that God has promised. But out of the conflict, out of the struggles to learn to see things in a new way, in the way of hope for a new creation promised by God, we are opened to new possibilities. We are opened to new challenges of understanding each other, as we seek to become one body, united by one spirit.

As Christians, and as the church, we are not immune from those challenges and conflicts that threaten to tear us apart. In fact, as a Church historian, I have come to realize there has never been a time in the history of the Christian church when it hasn't faced challenges and even threats to its existence. And yet, we keep thinking that once we've finally dealt with one challenge to our church, that everything will run smoothly. But that's not how it works. Instead, we keep jumping from one frying pan to another. And to make it worse, we are usually the ones that are building the fires and heating the frying pans, at the same time as we are trying to put out the fires! We tend to keep bringing the challenges upon ourselves because we have been trying to be gods in God's place. We madly run off in all directions, seeking to create enthusiasm and hope by our own efforts and understanding. But when we do that, we are engaging in false advertising, in order to entice people by false hopes.

We have become very good at creating false hopes and illusions about ourselves and the church. For example, we invite people to our churches by telling them how wonderful the church is, and then simply assume that they will want join with us. But then, if they do walk into our church, one of the first things they are likely to see is a huge cross on the front wall.

That's the last thing they expected to see. It is not what they want to see. Nor is it what they had been promised. All too often, the church has promised a life free from the crosses of life in order to attract people, and then when they come in the door, we show them a different reality. It is false advertising. But we hope nobody notices.

Down through the centuries, the church has always been good at offering, and even creating, false hope. It's one reason, I think, that the ordination service for a rostered minister includes a warning to the incoming pastor or deacon to not create false or illusory hopes. Yet that has always been our problem, one of our greatest temptations. What do such false and illusory hopes look like? These false hopes are promised whenever we tell people that once they become Christian, once they join the church, they will have no more problems. Life will be better. The crosses of life will all disappear.

We engage in peddling false hope when we promise ourselves, our church, and our world that church membership will make us successful, popular, and rich. False hopes offer a prosperity gospel which claims that as followers of the powerful and almighty God, we have a right to be privileged, successful, rich, and never face any health concerns anymore. But this is false advertising.

To tell the truth, we have to admit that even God's son, Jesus Christ, did not have a pampered life. He didn't escape hunger. He didn't get rich because he was faithful to God. He didn't always have a roof over his head. He was "scorned and rejected," and was wrongly accused. He was put to death on a cross, the punishment for the worst criminals. And to make it worse, he was crucified outside of the city—outside of community. He was cut off from the community in his final hours, abandoned by all. That doesn't sound like a "successful" life to me. False and illusory hopes don't fit into God's new creation or God's vision for all people and all creation. Only God can give a hope that is not false. Only God, through the Spirit, can make the fragmented body one.

We can despair, over how easy it is, even for people in the church, to get caught up in games of "King of the Castle." There are days when we can resonate with Elijah, who was about to give up in despair at what was happening in his world. He told God he had had enough. He wanted out of the rat race, because no one around him was faithful to God anymore. They had "abandoned God's covenant with them" (1 Kings 19:14). But God responded by telling him that there were still seven thousand who were faithful, and at the same time, God sent Elijah the prophet Elisha to work with him, and eventually continue God's mission after Elijah was taken to heaven (1 Kings 19:18–21).

Today, our congregations, our synod, our church can relate to Elijah, at least in terms of the despair over what appeared to be a shrinking remnant of the faithful community. As we look around, it is easy to fall into despair like Elijah did. It is easy to forget, as we look at dwindling numbers in our churches, that there continues to be a "faithful remnant" in the church today, just as there was in previous generations. This faithful remnant, including those who are gathered here in this place today, are still proclaiming the gospel, that Christ alone gives life, day in and day out.

But sometimes, it's hard to convince ourselves that Christ alone gives life. Sometimes we may feel hopeless because we no longer feel in control of our lives. We want to earn our hopes, own our hopes, and be the authors of our hope. That way, we feel in control. And so,

when we face challenges or disappointments, our natural tendency is to trust in ourselves instead of God. We want to bring about the resurrections in our lives, in our churches, and in our world, rather than place our trust in God. That way, we feel like we are in control. Our tendency is to try, as Luther described it, to want to be gods in God's place, so that we bring about resurrections all by ourselves. After all, we've developed the technology. We've even developed AI. But that is just another false hope in the making. It can't deliver what we need—a resurrection. It can only, even when it works at its very best, give us nothing more than a resuscitation, and that is not even a certainty.

We don't have to rely on self-created false hopes, however, offered by the false prophets surrounding Elijah, even though they may seem much more popular. Rather, a word of the Lord came to Elijah, reminding him that he didn't have to be in control. God was in control. God was acting to do new things, and to create a new community. And because of that, he could experience true hope. God then reminded Elijah that he was not alone, even though he felt that way. And God tells us the same thing. We are not alone! There are more than seven thousand faithful people in our church! To borrow a line from a Monty Python movie, "we're not dead yet"! We have hope!

We have hope! And even more importantly, we have hope because God has promised to never forsake us. The very meaning of the name given to Jesus, "Emmanuel" means "God with us." As long as we are still alive, the One Spirit is breathing new life into our bodies, and into the One Body, the church. And God doesn't stop there! Even when we think we can't breathe in life from God anymore, when our lungs seem to have collapsed, the One Spirit continues to breathe life into us, and a resurrection happens. Jesus says to us, just as he said to Lazarus, who had already died, "Lazarus, come out!" (John 11:43). The dead have been resurrected! Life is happening!

Jesus stands outside our self-made tombs, which we and our society have created for ourselves, the tombs in which we have buried ourselves. And Jesus says to us, "Come out of your tombs! Look! I've rolled away the stone so you can go from death to life!" And that gives us a sure and certain hope, because when God speaks, things happen. Resurrections happen. That's what gives us hope—so much so, that we confess each Sunday, "I believe in the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting." That, my friends, is an expression of hope, through and through. God is in the business of resurrection and life. God is breathing life into our bodies as individuals, and God the Spirit is breathing life into the church, the One Body of Christ.

God is in the business of emptying tombs and breathing life into death. That is something to celebrate. Such a God is deserving of our worship, our very lives. Our hope—our solid, on the ground, realistic hope—comes not from us, but from God and God alone. And as we gather to worship, week after week, we hear, in Scripture and in song, that God has promised to not abandon the church. For God to abandon the church would be for him to abandon Christ's own body. But God doesn't abandon the Body of Christ, the Church. Nor did God abandon Christ on the cross. Rather, God entered death with Christ, and did something even greater. God raised Christ from the dead, and in doing so, opened the way to life for us as well. God, the one who resurrects all things, is the source of our hope.

But here's the scary part. Resurrections have a way of changing things. And we may not always want that change to happen. But God does not say that the church will always remain the same, even if we might be extremely comfortable with what has become so familiar to us. The only thing we can count on to remain the same is Jesus the Christ, who is the "same, yesterday, today, and tomorrow" (Heb 13:8). Everything else is fair game for change, because of the resurrection of Christ. The resurrection is God's change, *par excellence*! God promises, in the resurrection, to do a new thing, a wonderful thing, rather than simply restoring the status quo. And that means that God continues to reform us, the church, and our world, using ever new reformers that are arising in our midst. God is not done with us yet—not by a long shot! And that gives us hope.

The LWF Assembly Study Guide echoes this focus on how hope opens us, the church, and even society, to change, to experience a new reformation. The church—and society!—are in the process of becoming a new creation. The Spirit is moving, and something is happening! Hope is gathering momentum!¹¹

This experienced and shared hope is a gift from God. When we were baptized, God resurrected us by joining us to Christ's own resurrection (Rom 6:3-11). As God's church, the Body of Christ, we have an important role to play today in our world. We are a resurrection people and a resurrection church. And where better to be a resurrection people than among people who need resurrections? Where better to be a resurrection church and resurrection people, than among those who have given up hope, people who feel like the breath of life has been taken from them, people who feel abandoned on their own crosses of life, crosses that society have placed them on and then walked away.

Those who want to take the breath of the Spirit from us, and who have placed us in tombs in the outskirts of society, think that they have dealt with us and can now do whatever they want. They think they are in control. But they don't know God! God is in the resurrection business, and those in power, those in control, those who have abandoned God, and those thinking that God is weak or dead, have inadvertently placed Christ's body in the prime location for the resurrection business: in the cemeteries of life. And that is where God is working in our world, to bring a sure and certain hope to people who have lost all hope.

Many people have said to me that they think it is difficult to be the church today, because the church has been "sidelined" by society. They tell me they long for the "good old days," when the church was respected, when the leader of a denomination could phone up the premier or prime minister and get a meeting the next day. They tell me of how they long for those "good old days" when Christianity was the "official religion" of our society. They long for those "good old days" when the church could dictate morality to the nation, and our country was, to borrow a phrase from the United State's pledge of allegiance, "one nation under God." As they admit, it was nice to have a privileged place in society, to be in control of things. And it is no wonder that they mourn the loss of that power and prestige. It is totally understandable. For in today's world, they are getting whiffs of death and decay in the air. It smells suspiciously like the air around the tomb where Lazarus had been buried. It was what the women who came to the tomb on the first day of the week were also expecting to smell.

¹¹ Daniélsson, *One Body, One Spirit, One Hope*, 58.

It was one of the reasons they had brought along spices and ointments: to cover up, or mask the smell. But what better place for the Spirit of God, the Spirit of life, to be operating!

Let me suggest to you that if we don't get a whiff of death and decay, in the places we are proclaiming the gospel, then we aren't close enough to Jesus the Christ, the one who is bringing about resurrections in those places. Resurrections don't happen where everyone is already alive, where people already have everything they need. Instead, resurrections happen among people who have been forgotten, those who have already been dismissed by the mainstream of society, those who are considered, for all intents and purposes, to be dead. That's where resurrections happen. Resurrections happen to those who have given up their hope in human promises, not to those who still think that they can create hope all by themselves.

I think that we have a great advantage in being the church in this day and age. As a small remnant, as a part of a church that society has, by and large, ignored and pushed to the sidelines, it means that we have incredible opportunities before us. My father-in-law, who was in business all his life, often said to me that he had learned, early on, to see challenges and chaos, not as problems to be avoided, but rather, as golden opportunities. You see, challenges and chaos take away the power of the status quo to keep things the same, even if they aren't working anymore. In the midst of chaos, people could either keep on trying to do things the same old way, with the same results, or try something new. My father-in-law saw dropping sales or losses in the market share as new opportunities for breaking out of the old ways that weren't working, and to do something new. Challenges are not problems, but great opportunities.

Our church is in a time of great opportunity. It's no use trying to recapture the past. That is not what we are called to do. We've never been called to do that. Instead, God is placing new opportunities before us, as God works to bring about a new creation. Amid all the changes happening around us, we may read the signs and think they are telling us that the church is either dying or fading fast, and that we should simply give up on the church. On the other hand, reading the signs of the times, we may see the hand of God at work, opening up new possibilities. We may see God working to bring about a new reformation, a reformation in our time and place, a reformation that no one is expecting, because they have written off God. They have written off God's church. But they have forgotten that God is the God of new creations and of resurrections.

As a church, we are often written off by society, and by others who may think the church is irrelevant. We, as a small church in a big world, may have been written off by those who feel that the church should be a controlling, moral voice in society, working to make the church a moral police force in society once again. I have had people tell me that the reason our church is dying is because of the positions we have taken on various issues in society. We've been accused of being too liberal, of being afraid to lay down the law. They want the church to control morality in our society—at least a morality that overlooks how those in power are abusing it for their own means. But according to Thomas Aquinas, the medieval theologians, and even Luther, the authority for morality is not the church or scripture, but

human natural law.¹² In other words, it is the primary responsibility of society, not the church. We as the church are not a government whose job it is to pass laws to make sure people are not treated as less than human. While we are called to support such actions that would prevent society from treating others as less than human, we are not the legislative body of civil society. Nor are we called, as a church, to be the morality police force for society, enforcing morals and standards for the sake of the government. It is easy for society to reach into our own Scriptures to remind us that St Paul has told us to obey those in authority over us, while conveniently forgetting that St. Peter also remind us that we are also supposed to obey God rather than humans. Blindly giving support to all government actions has too often led to the abuse of those in our community that are vulnerable. Blindly supporting rulers and governments who want to control others, too often destroys those in our midst whose voices are not heard or listened to. Instead, the church is called to hold the rulers accountable, so that all people are treated as people created in the image of God. The enforcement of a morality that brings life to all individuals and to the community is the job of government, not the church. God has given government that job description. The government are the legislators in our society. That's how God works in society, outside of the church.

However, this does not mean we are not to be concerned about morality, or ethical behavior, or the abuses of power. While the church may—and should—call civil authorities to task when they are not doing their jobs, that is not our primary job description. That is the job description for civil society. We must never forget that God also uses people outside the church to bring about the kind of society God intends for the world. God is not so foolish as to only rely on the church to bring about the realm of God. Thus, when we pray the Lord's Prayer, and come to the phrase, "Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth, as it is in heaven," we cannot forget that God brings about this "kingdom" or "realm" by working through all of society, and not just the church. God uses government and laws and rules and regulations to make sure that civil society does not treat people as less than human, or abuse God's creation. God uses civil structures to keep the One Body of all creation together and healthy. That is the job God has assigned to them. And to do that, governments and civil society need all the wisdom and understanding and patience that they can get.

Our job, however, as a church, is to both proclaim, and be, a resurrection people. We are called to be a people who reach out to those in our communities who are vulnerable, those whose lives have been torn apart by warfare or strife or injustices, and those without hope. We are called to speak a word of hope to them, to proclaim to them a word of resurrection for them. This also means that we are called to speak out when people act as if they are "more than human," when they try to act like gods in our world. Such people, who think or act as if they are gods in our world, need to die to themselves and their self-perceived powers, and be placed in a tomb, before they can hear the promise of resurrection.

Supporting those who are vulnerable, and those who are often treated as less than human, however, puts us on the fringes of our society. Some would even say that it makes us irrelevant. So when people say to us, "The church is irrelevant in today's world," we can chime in and respond by saying to them, "Yes, you are right. We agree that the church is irrelevant—to those seeking power and control. We are irrelevant to them because the church cannot

¹² See here Johannes Heckel, *Lex Charitatis: A Juristic Disquisition of Law in the Theology of Martin Luther*. Translated and edited by Gottfried G. Krodel (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010).

deliver power and control to anyone. That isn't the job of the church. That is not in our job description, given to us in Baptism. In fact, the opposite is true. The church is totally irrelevant as a force to be reckoned with in dictating and enforcing power and morality in our society. In fact, society in general, and governments in particular have been quite disappointed in the church's failures to be their morality police. That was one of the reasons that the government originally gave tax breaks and exemptions to church properties. Doing so, they thought, would make the church beholden to the government, so the churches would fall in line, and help governments control the populace. But that hasn't happened. It's something the church has never been very good at doing. That's not our in our job description.

God has given the church, on the other hand, a different task, a different job description. God has given the church a different task than the job description given to civil society, and God has equipped the church for its unique task. The church's primary, and most important task, you see, is to be people of the resurrection. The church's task is to proclaim the gospel, and live by God's grace, so that people can have a sure and certain hope. The church's task is to help people who have been wounded or abandoned or forgotten, so that they can experience the life-giving gospel.

The church is about God calling the One Body together, by the One Spirit, who gives those without hope a sure and certain hope. And this hope is not based on how successful we are, how numerous we are as a church. No, this hope is based on Jesus Christ, who has been raised from the dead and who raises us to new life even as we are joined to him in his baptism. But now, having shed our pretences that we can control society, we can finally realize that since no one is paying attention to us, we have a great amount of freedom to do the most radical thing: to proclaim the Gospel, and to help people who need it most experience the gospel.

And that is what the church is about. As the One Body of Christ we are called to be people of the resurrection, people who are willing to proclaim the gospel to those in need. When we do that, God breathes life into people, God breathes the Spirit of God, the breath of life into them. Then they can experience the Gospel, and not just hear it proclaimed. We don't need to be a big, numerous, or powerful church in our society. That is not what we are called to be. Nor is that our identity! There are enough people around us who are more than willing to create such a church, a church of self-made saints. They can take care of themselves. The self-righteous "saints" with their "self-styled holiness" have no need for God, or for other people, for that matter. They've got it made, all by themselves. One of my favourite sayings from Luther describes such a church:

May a merciful God preserve me from a Christian Church in which everyone is a saint! I want to be and remain in the church and little flock of the fainthearted, the feeble, and the ailing, who feel and recognize the wretchedness of their sins, who sigh and cry to God incessantly for comfort and help, who believe in the forgiveness of sin, and who suffer persecution for the sake of the Word, which they confess and teach purely and without adulteration. Satan is a cunning rogue. Through his fanatics he wants to trick the simple-minded into the belief that the preaching of the Gospel is useless. "Greater effort" is necessary, they say. "We must lead a holy life,

bear the cross, and endure persecution.” And by such a semblance of self-styled holiness, which runs counter to the Word of God, many a person is misled. But our righteousness and holiness is Christ. In Him, not in ourselves, we have perfection (Col. 2:10). And I find comfort in, and cling to, the words of St. Paul spoken in 1 Cor. 1:30: “God made Christ our Wisdom, our Righteousness.”¹³

God made Christ our Wisdom and our Righteousness. Our wisdom and righteousness come from this Christ. And in his wisdom, Christ calls us, and joins with us in becoming a living church, rather than a relic.

What does a living church look like? It looks like the One Body, filled with the One Spirit, and trusting in the One Hope. This church is called to be with “the little flock of the fainthearted, the feeble and the ailing, who feel and recognize their sin, their failures, and those who sigh and cry to God incessantly for comfort and help.” We are called to be a church to proclaim the gospel, to proclaim the resurrection, even if we find ourselves out on the fringes of society, ignored by the world. But there, out on the fringes of society, we can go about our business without interference. The world may think we are doing nothing. But we are planting the seeds of resurrection. We are planting the seeds of hope, every time we proclaim that God is in the business of resurrections and life. And God brings those things about by proclaiming, and giving us, the forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation. And that truth is a life-changer!

God is busy at work in this world. And that is our hope. We may not see it a lot of the time, but a lot of that work is happening below the surface, or we are looking in the wrong places. But we do know that God is busy, most often working incognito, behind the masks of medical doctors and nurses and nurse practitioners, bringing about healing. God is working behind the scenes, casting out false spirits and breathing into people the One, Holy Spirit. God is unrecognized, even as God brings Hope to those who have been ostracized or who have given up hope or who have been abandoned and forgotten, through the caring words of a friend, a telephone call from a neighbour, or a warm casserole delivered when it is most needed.

God is also busy, hidden in plain view, in the waters of baptism and in the bread and wine at the table, giving people, with such basic elements, the forgiveness of sins, life and salvation. No one thinks to look for God among water, bread, and wine, among those who appear to be drowning or starving, who have no clean drinking water. But that’s where God is. And because God is there, we, as the body of Christ are dragged into those stories of life and resurrection as well.

God is busy reminding us, week in and week out, that it is not our job to create One Body, to be of One Spirit, and to have the One hope by our own efforts and understandings. That is not our job. Such a job would be impossible. But it is God’s work. Our job is to live in the One Body, that God has created, to breathe in the One Spirit that is blown into us, and to live in the One Hope that has been given to us by Jesus the Christ. We don’t have to do what is impossible. We don’t have to create hope. Rather, we are called to live in the hope that has

¹³ “Sermons on John 1 (1537),” LW 22:55; WA 46:583.

been given to us by Christ. And that sets us free to live fully in God's grace, with hope and expectation.

Life—and the life of faith in particular—is so much easier, when we daily remind ourselves that as baptized children of God, we have been set free from trying to do God's job. And in that marvelous freedom of not having to be as perfect or as flawless as Christ was, we can learn what it means to be fully human. Then, we can also be free to help our family, friends and neighbors discover and experience what it means to be fully human as well. We can help others live life to the fullest. And that gives people hope.

The Study Guide for the Lutheran World Federation Assembly in Poland had this to say about hope:

Hope is a gift of the Holy Spirit. It knows what God has done in Christ, sees it continually surfacing in everyday life, and waits for the fulfilment of God's promises. Hope animates that movement toward communion. Hope liberates from powers and principalities of this world and encourages believers to forge ahead despite the many obstacles surrounding them. Hope unites, creating solidarity in both expectation and action. In this dynamic towards an ever-deeper communion, diversity is not displaced, dismissed, destroyed, or dominated. Rather, diversity is celebrated as every person and community is invited into God's reconciling action.¹⁴

In the midst of the COVID 19 pandemic that affected the whole world, the President of the LWF, Dr. Filibus Musa, declared that hope is "one of the most powerful gifts we can offer to our time ... because all that we expect to still happen has already happened in Bethlehem, at the cross in Golgotha, and in Christ's resurrection."¹⁵

Yesterday, I began with a story about a church that had been ransacked. But where I ended the story is not how the story actually ends. It's time to hear the rest of the story, as Paul Harvey would say on his radio show. We go back to that church that had been ransacked by vandals, vandals who had spray painted on the altar, "God is Nowhere." As the congregation gathered that Sunday morning, filled with a despair that was only heightened by what was written on the altar, a little girl who had just learned to read whispered loudly to her mother, "Mommy! I know what it says!" And before her mother could stop her, for hearing it out loud would rub more salt into the wound, the little girl said, "Mommy, it says "God is Now Here!"

God is now here. We can despair about the facts and figures that say our church is going the way of dinosaurs. We see the wreckage that has been left behind from the battles we've fought, and think we've been abandoned by God and by the world. But there is another way to look at it—the way of the little girl, the prophet. For out of the chaos, we discover a new message: *GOD IS NOW HERE!* And we as Lutherans, of all people, should know that entering into a time of chaos opens new possibilities for us, new possibilities for being a

¹⁴ Daniélsson, *One Body, One Spirit, One Hope*, 52.

¹⁵ The Lutheran World Federation, "Address of the LWF President" at the Meeting of the LWF Council Video Conference, 18–23 June 2021. Accessed 8 March 2023 (www.lutheranworld.org/sites/default/files/2022-02/20210618_-_council_-_exhibit_10_address_of_the_lwf_president.pdf). Daniélsson, *One Body, One Spirit, One Hope*, 52.

church, here and now, in this place. The Reformation, after all, took place in such a time. There was social unrest, old, traditional values and understandings of one's role in society were changing rapidly, society was moving from an agrarian market to a money market. Princes were paying great sums of money to become bishops, and bishops were paying great amounts of money to get ownership of lands and cities. And in the chaos, people were ready for change. They desperately hoped for change.

Hope is found in the words, "God is now here." But those words aren't entirely accurate. For God has always made it clear, through Scripture, the Word, and Sacraments, that God has always been here, and God will always be here, from before the creation of the world to the end of time. That is our sure and certain hope—and promise!—from God.

Jesus comes to us, as we stand grieving in front of the empty tomb, and asks us, "Why do you seek the living among the dead?" Why are we looking at the old ways that we "did church" and grieving, when we could be looking at the opportunities for being a new church, a new creation, where Christ is creating new life?

So what does it mean for the people of God in this Saskatchewan Synod of ours, to live out the theme for this convention, "One Body, One Spirit, One Hope?" Perhaps the Lutheran World Federation Assembly, which met under the same theme last year, says it best. Let me finish by quoting their conclusions. The conclusion begins by saying that this theme "encourages us to continue to embrace the gift and task of being [community]¹⁶ for our time." And then it goes on to say,

"One Body" invites us to give thanks for the blessing of bodies, and to listen for the cries of bodies who continue to be marginalized, excluded or violated. Bodies cry out, calling this [community] to listen, to amplify, to heal and to re-member into one Body. The contexts in which we live and worship have been deeply affected by the physical isolations demanded by COVID 19 restrictions. This global experience of a pandemic has focused our [community's] collective attention on the importance of bodily presence and the embodied nature of the church. What does it mean that God's action through preaching and sharing the sacraments addresses the whole person in our bodily and spiritual self? What does it mean that we are sent out to serve the whole embodied being of our neighbor?

"One Spirit" invites us to consider the diversity of the Spirit's gifts that exist across our [community, to build up the One Body]. The one Spirit nurtures the Word to grow within diverse bodies born to diverse families who live in diverse languages and cultures and yet all participate in God's plan of reconciliation. How can we, as a [community] of churches, embody mutual accountability, faithfully tending those gifts of the Spirit so that they bear diverse fruits in our lives and our churches? In our [community], how are diverse gifts nurtured, understood, invited, and welcomed to participate in the mission of the church? What language do we use to address differences? How do we as a [community] of churches create the space in

¹⁶ The word, "communion," with the reference to the 'communion' of the Lutheran World Federation on the international level, is replaced here with the word 'community' to reflect our local context.

which we can discern between the gifts of the Spirit and those spirits of the age that would continue to divide, dominate and destroy the body?

“One Hope” invites us to consider how our churches proclaim hope, the ways in which our [community] embodies the experience of God’s Kingdom, full of grace and peace in our midst, and the ways in which our [community] participates in God’s continual action of reconciling the world to God’s self. In a world torn asunder by war and narratives that drive ecological, social and political conflict, how can a [community] of reconciled diversity help people resist fake news and tell anew the story of life according to a horizon of hope? How does our [church] inspire people to renew their communities through acts of loving service that heal bodies and souls, establish justice, and make peace? How does our [community] respond to Peter’s appeal to “Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you” (1 Pet 3:15)?¹⁷

Our response, our defense is simple. In Christ, we are One Body. The One Spirit calls us, through Word, water, bread, and wine, to cling to the One Hope that is grounded in Christ. We are a resurrected people. Life is before us, and all around us. God is here, in our midst, in the Word, in the sacraments, and in each other. And because of this, we have hope. God’s world of life and hope is before us. Thanks be to God.

¹⁷ Daniélsson, *One Body, One Spirit, One Hope*, 62–64.