

People of Hope for This Time

*So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love.
1 Corinthians 13:13*

Hope is one of the three virtues of the Christian life, along with faith and love (ἀγάπη). Hope is distinct because it is always directed to the future. In a sermon on the Christian hope, Luther describes Christians as waiting in this life for the glorious appearance of the Lord Jesus Christ on the Last Day.¹ Francis Pieper went on to explain, “This hope ensures the happy life of a Christian; this is the key to a successful ministry.”² The Biblical/Christian/Lutheran understanding of hope contrasts with the pessimism of the world. Understanding demographics and examining culture shifts is helpful, but we cannot build our congregational or synodical identity on them. That simply denies the role of God in our life together.

If hope is to be genuine hope, however, it must be founded on something (or someone) which affords reasonable grounds for confidence in its fulfillment. The Bible bases its hope in God and His saving acts. Hope is trustful expectation, particularly with reference to the fulfillment of God's promises. Biblical hope is the anticipation of a favorable outcome under God's guidance. More specifically, hope is the confidence that what God has done for us in the past guarantees our participation in what God will do in the future. This is my hope!

At the end of August, church workers and lay people came together in three locations (Nebraska, South Dakota, and Iowa West) with the express purpose of developing 5-6 key concepts about how we, together, can provide positive, collaborative leadership in an increasingly fragmented society and church body. Disregard and division weaken the body. These meetings worked to establish common ground among those with a “diversity of gifts” within these three Districts. Hopeful leaders are encouraging. Rather than focusing on yesterday's failures, they focus on the unique strengths that we have in our life together. Each of these districts are working now to use these results to help review strategic plans and plot a course for our work together. About 70 people participated at each location, seeking unity and faithfulness around God's Word and the Lutheran Confessions. Below is a summary of my initial address to the gatherings and some of the primary outcomes that would benefit not only these three districts, but our entire Synod.

For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. 1 Corinthians 12:12

Every person is fearfully and wonderfully made. Your body is a miracle formed in your mother's womb by God. Each part of your body is important for your body to do its work. When one of those parts is not working according to design, struggles soon follow. In several letters, Paul uses this illustration to describe the Church. It is an important illustration for us to consider as we move forward as a Synod. The simple truth is this: I need you. You need me. We need each other. Each one of us is important. We are all together the Body of Christ. In Christ, we have hope. When we are not living out who God has created and gifted us to be, struggles soon follow.

¹ Pieper, F. (1953). *Christian Dogmatics* (electronic ed., Vol. 3, p. 85). St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House.

² IBID

Though the Body of Christ is bigger than just The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, this is certainly true within our fellowship itself. Every one of you, and every member of our fellowship, is an important part of the Body of Christ and the work of God’s kingdom. As the Body of Christ, we are His incarnational presence in this world. Paul uses this imagery in Romans 12, 1 Corinthians 12, and Ephesians 4. The theme is clear: we who are connected to Christ are joined together as the Body of Christ. Each one of you is a part of it. Each one of you is critical to how well the body functions. We are all interdependent with one another.

Our struggle in and with the body is no different today than it was at the time of Paul. It is easy to think that you are not important, that you have little to offer, and that others are far more important. It is so easy to think that your effort and your input is insignificant. Even as we all struggle with pride and arrogance, each of us still struggles with self-image and self-security. You dismiss the value of who made you, how He formed you, and the gift of faith and spiritual gifts by which He has made you uniquely you.

At the same time, it is easy for you to dismiss your need for others. “The eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I have no need of you.’” As Missouri Synod Lutherans, we cry out against a society that disposes of the weak and dismisses the mentally challenged, yet we often divide ourselves from those brothers and sisters in Christ who do not think or speak or worship exactly the way we do. We are quick to label and discard those who do not share our personal convictions.

Our Synod was born out of conflict, and we seem to thrive on conflict as if it were in our DNA. Our forebearers, who first journeyed to the United States, were in conflict against the Prussian Union. Soon after their arrival and settlement, they sent Bishop Stephen across the river. This was quickly followed by the Altenburg Debate. Later there was conflict with the Statement of the 44, then the Seminex Walk Out, then the controversies of Bohlmann and Preus, and most recently worship and communion practices and the roles of laity and clergy in the church. The very fact that we have had, and I believe need to have, these difficult discussions gives me hope. I believe one of the unique strengths of the LCMS is the way we have historically been able to hold issues in tension. Tension when rightly applied keeps a banjo in tune, keeps a clock in time, and keeps theology in check. We should not diminish these challenges. **Clearly it is important that we stand on and speak out the truth of God’s Word, but how you speak that truth is often as important as what you have to say—especially in today’s world of technology and social media.** Too often we mirror the fractured society in which we dwell, rather than being salt, leaven, and light.

The body of Christ is called to be different. *In Christ, we are different.*

Bone cells are nothing like skin cells which are nothing like blood cells which are nothing like tendon or muscle cells or fingernail or hair cells or nerve cells. Yet they all come out of the one cell, formed when sperm and egg are joined into one cell producing a common DNA.

By the gift of the Spirit, as you are baptized into the body and given the one Spirit to drink, you are recreated into the image of Christ. You have been given, so to speak, the DNA of Jesus. We share this DNA as the members of His body by His grace through faith. While we may look and work in unique ways, we all share the common DNA of our Savior, Jesus. We are called to celebrate those unique differences while fostering our common unity.

Now, as much as ever, we want to be committed in our gathering together for face-to-face conversations. Life together, gathering around Word and Sacrament is fundamental. True unity can only come out of God's uniting Word. Trust is fostered as relationships are built upon that Word.

- As **people of hope**, let us commit ourselves to time together in worship and study in our congregations and in our circuit gatherings, conferences, conventions, and workshops.
- As **people of hope**, let us commit ourselves to personal conversations around the Word and our Confessions, working to share and live them and not just intellectually study them.
- As **people of hope**, let us commit ourselves to one-on-one visitation, focused on building relationships to encourage and challenge one another. God is a visiting God. He came in the flesh to visit and redeem. His whole body is designed for being in touch with one another.

Is this too much to hope for? I don't believe so! All of this fosters transparency and trust, which enables healthy conflict and tension as needed to help us move forward, committed to our shared work in Christ. In the image of Christ, the Church works to equip, release, and trust each member to do the work God has given them. Practice, not perfection, is the key to discipleship. Loving correction and fine-tuning will always be a part of that process of learning.

As a pastor and as President of the Nebraska District, I have great hope for the future of our district and Synod. Remember that biblical hope is the anticipation of a favorable outcome under God's guidance. **I am focused on three primary outcomes.**

First, **Worker Wellness and Relational Health**. It is hard to disciple others if you are not living in hope. Spiritual, physical, and relational wellness are critical to a life of discipleship. This includes Sabbath rest, connection to God in His Word, and time for self, marriage, and primary friendships. A healthy Synod needs healthy workers to lead healthy congregations.

Second, **Healthy Circuits and District Gatherings**. We are working with Circuit Visitors and other leaders, so that when we gather, people will experience hope, joy, unconditional love, community identity, and loving correction. First, **we want to experience joy and delight in one another** as a reflection of the Lord's face shining upon us. Second, **we want to walk in Christ's *hesed/agape* sacrificial love for one another**, committed to one another in Christ. Third, **we want to experience fellowship and community in Christ**. And finally, in that joy, love, and community, **we want to practice loving and firm correction** when someone is not living out who God created them to be. Again, all this takes time together to build trust, to listen, and to speak to one another; time together to solidify our common vision and to foster collaboration in mission.

Third, **we want to see Healthy Congregations and Ministries fostering that same culture of hope, joy, love, community identity, and loving correction**, as we gather around God's Word, not merely to gain more information but to lead people into relational discipleship. Again, each member of the body is working according to God's design and gifts. You engage your community with the mercy of Christ, witnessing in your vocations of neighbor, co-worker, family, and faith community. Every One is indeed His Witness in Christ. Our witness to one another and to our neighbor is loving them for the long haul and not just the quick sale.

The Church does not need another savior. The Church already has the Savior, crucified, risen, ascended, and ruling. Our hope is in Christ as the whole body is at work. This is our life together as the Body of Christ. Gathered around His Word and Sacraments and guided by our Confessions, we live in and live

out our baptismal identity in the DNA of Jesus. I need you. You need me. We need each other. “For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ.”

As the groups in each District processed a vision and looked to the future, five primary concepts emerged:

1. First and foremost, we want to focus TOGETHER on Divine Truth with Scriptures and our Confessions. We need regular gatherings with honest, fraternal conversations among the brothers where there are concerns of doctrine and practice. This is part of our ongoing work in Nebraska as we work on circuit visitor training and as we develop regional Koinonia opportunities to work through troubling issues.
2. Gathering around God’s Word, we want to foster trust and relationships, both around God’s Word and with opportunity to play and celebrate our hope, joy, and love in Christ with one another. We are the body of Christ and need each other. We are not enemies. We are family.
3. We want to continue to build a culture of discipleship: Empowering adults. Equipping parents. Lay leadership. Strengthening youth and Lutheran school ministries. Creative school planting.
4. As people of hope, we want to engage our communities with the compassion of Christ and reach out with the Gospel of Christ. We equip, empower, and engage the whole Body of Christ for service and witness in all our vocations.
5. Healthy congregations and healthy circuits/districts/Synod need healthy workers. We want to continue to build a culture of holistic, relational health for the physical, emotional, and spiritual care of church workers for the restoration of hope and joy.

None of this is original. None of this is rocket science. This is the hard work of being Church, being the Body of Christ. Biblical hope is the anticipation of a favorable outcome under God's guidance. This hope will not come with more resolutions and tightened bylaws. Those cannot lead us forward.

Ministry happens when people spend time with one another in a discipleship posture around the Word of God. And when something disrupts those relationships, rather than walking away or throwing a punch, we need to double down our efforts toward repentance and reconciliation. There is no quick solution or easy answer.

This hope I have as a Christian leader is not a Utopian view of our life together. Throughout history, the church is “hidden under the cross.” There is no golden age of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod that we need to rediscover. Despite all the prognosticators of her demise, I firmly believe the LCMS is still the best thing going and has an important role in the future of Christ’s Church on earth. We expect doctrinal fidelity and mission priority. As the Body of Christ, it is critical that we remain committed to both and to one another.

The fundamental location of fulfilling that great commission of doctrine and mission is in the local congregation. Supporting the local work of congregations is the first and main priority. The best opportunity that I have as District President to strengthen that work is fostering worker relational health. Our personal lives and relationships are our loudest Gospel message. God calls us to live in and live out that Gospel first in our own walk of faith and with our spouse and those closest to us. That witness speaks to those around us as we reach out to build stronger relationships with our fellow workers in Circuit and District. This is how we live out our Christian hope and live out purity of doctrine and the priority of mission in the local congregation.

People of Hope

Ministry Priorities

Hope—Church Worker Relational Health

A major focus in Nebraska is worker wellness: spiritual, physical, vocational, intellectual, and especially relational health. Many of our workers are hurting and their families are struggling. Our personal lives and relationships are our loudest Gospel message. God calls us to live in and live out that Gospel first in our own walk of faith and with our spouse and those closest to us. Too often in caring for the Bride of Christ, we neglect our own bride. We encourage Sabbath rest, connection to God, time for self, marriage, family, and primary friendships.

Hope—Healthy Circuits and District

Our unity is in Christ. We need one another as the Body of Christ. Disregard and division weaken the body. We cannot walk together if we do not talk together, and we cannot talk together if we do not meet together. Much of the tension in our Synod is centered in the relationships of our pastors, or lack thereof. We need to foster healthy circuits and district gatherings. We need a Synod where diverse opinions listen to one another, dialog, and cooperate—collegially and collaboratively. We need to be committed to time together. Our circuits, conferences, and personal conversations need to be gathered around Word and Confessions—working to share and live them and not just study them, as we practice transparency and build trust. We need to build a stronger sense of community so workers experience joy, unconditional love, community identity, and loving correction.

Again, all this takes time together to build trust, to listen, and to speak to one another; time together to solidify our common vision and to foster collaboration in mission.

Hope—Congregation Focus – Mercy and Witness

The fundamental location to live out the great commission of doctrine and mission is in the local congregation. Supporting the local work of congregations is the first and main priority. Worker relational health and stronger relationships with our fellow workers in circuit and district all should focus on the Great Commandment and the Great Commission.

The hope we have as Synod is built on Christ and His promise to complete what He began. Our spiritual ancestors left Germany under religious persecution with the hope of building a church on confession and mission. As the writer of Hebrews reminds us, *“Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.”* (Hebrews 10:23-25 ESV)

Confession empowers mission and mission proclaims confession. We live in and live out our baptismal identity in Jesus. We work to engage our community, showing the mercy of Christ and giving witness to the Gospel of Christ in our various vocations for the long haul and not the quick sale. This is a time for Hope as we live in and live out purity of doctrine and the priority of mission in the local congregation.