

THE 

FEBRUARY 2024

LUTHERAN AMBASSADOR

THE NOT-SO-MINOR

PROP HE TS

WORDS FOR OUR LIVES,
TOO



The not-so-minor prophets.

I can't be the only one who freezes when the Scripture reader says, "Our reading today is from the Book of Haggai."

Some of us might quietly flip through those mysterious pages in a desperate attempt to find the passage sometime before the benediction. Others sneak a clandestine peek at the table of contents, or simply smile and nod as if they are very familiar with the passage and don't need to bother looking it up.

The Minor Prophets are often confusing and unfamiliar to us. The prophetic poetry and not-always-obvious historical situations can make these books seem inaccessible and unhelpful. We hope the articles in this issue show you that these short books are an important part of God's message to us and are certainly worth another look.

These books are not called "minor" because they lack value, but because they are generally shorter than the other books of Scripture. These 12 short books are packed with meaning and significance. In fact, the threads of the whole biblical narrative run through the Minor Prophets!

In this issue, Pastor Seth Moan will explain the idea of the "day of the Lord" seen throughout the Old Testament by looking especially at the Book of Joel. Pastor Matthew Pillman highlights the biblical theme of restoration by looking at the story of Amos, the shepherd prophet who called the people from their complacency but promised to "repair," "raise up," and "rebuild" the house of King David.

We read the Bethlehem prophecy in Micah each Advent and Christmas season, but Pastor Brett Boe will help us also see the prophet's call for justice, kindness, and humility. Renah Thompson makes the connection between Habakkuk's day and ours: the people of Judah were called to live by faith in the face of danger because even in wrath, our God remembers mercy.

Pastor Ryan Patenaude picks up the theme of hope amid judgment by looking especially at the Book of Zephaniah, who prophesied about a future "mighty one who will save" who "is in your midst." Finally, while many of the Minor Prophets hint at the identity of this promised Savior, Pastor David Johnson focuses on this "New David," a king who Zechariah tells us humbly comes to his people with justice and righteousness.

These short, prophetic messages were given to a particular group of people facing a particular internal or external conflict in a particular historical situation, but their words have been preserved for us to read, too. God spoke through these prophets long ago to warn, chastise, and comfort his chosen and precious people. Any glance at the church today, and our own hearts, should remind us that we still need to be warned, chastised, and comforted by our just and merciful God.

Even more than that, though, being familiar with the Minor Prophets gives us more opportunity to engage in conversation with God. The pages of Scripture—even these not-so-minor prophets—are where we hear the voice of God and where the Holy Spirit is at work to create genuine repentance and saving faith.

Don't let the Minor Prophets intimidate you with their poetic and sometimes confusing language. Read through the articles in this issue and see what topic or book piques your curiosity. Grab your Bible—a study Bible can be a helpful tool!—and listen to God speaking.

—Pastor Andrew Kneeland



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EDITOR

Pastor Andrew Kneeland
laeditor@aflc.org

MANAGING EDITOR

Ruth Gunderson
ruthg@aflc.org

CIRCULATION

Liz McCarlson
lasubscriptions@aflc.org

EDITORIAL BOARD

Monica Coyle
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3110 E. Medicine Lake Blvd.,
Plymouth, MN 55441
763-545-5631
lasubscriptions@aflc.org

Right is right, even if nobody does it. Wrong is wrong
even if everybody is wrong about it.
[G. K. Chesterton]

“

Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit,
says the LORD of hosts.

[Zechariah 4:6]

For without faith and without Christ human nature and human power are much too weak to do good works: such as to call on God, to have patience in suffering, to love the neighbor, to engage diligently in legitimate callings, to be obedient, to avoid evil lust, etc. Such lofty and genuine works cannot be done without the help of Christ. [Augsburg Confession, Article 20]

You can't crowbar your way into change. You can only be melted. [Dane Ortlund]

In order to discover the character of people we have only to observe what they love. [Augustine]

Worry does not empty tomorrow of its sorrows; it empties today of its strength. [Corrie ten Boom]

THE NOT-SO-MINOR PROPHETS

JOEL

THE DAY OF THE LORD

BY PASTOR SETH MOAN



Mon-Dak-Ada family Bible camp is a special place. Despite the 90-degree July weather, my family and I were refreshed after our time there last summer. However, the warm, dry conditions were ideal for a considerable number of grasshoppers to join in on the fun. Anywhere you went, you could expect to cross paths with them.

While grasshoppers made quite an appearance at camp last year, they also show up in the Bible more than you might expect. As you consider some of those instances, you may recall John the Baptist's unusual diet of locusts and wild honey or perhaps the report of Moses' spies, who felt like grasshoppers in comparison to the great stature of those who occupied the land of Canaan. Most often, however, Scripture speaks of locusts in terms of God's use of them to bring judgment upon people. One example of this is the plague of locusts that God sent upon the Egyptians for refusing to let his people go. While locusts are mentioned in various places throughout Scripture, there is no book of the Bible in which they take a more prominent position than in the Book of Joel.

The first chapter describes how a plague of locusts devastated Judah, wiping out crops and leading to famine in the land. This catastrophe, however, was only a warning of the greater devastation that would come upon the people of Judah unless they repented. The day of the Lord was coming, and it would be a day of judgment upon the wicked. Only those who turned to the Lord in repentance and faith would be saved.

After the prophet's announcement of this coming day of the Lord in 2:1, he goes on to describe it in verses 2–11. He refers to it as "a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and thick darkness!" (2:2). With the desolation of the locust plague fresh in the minds of his audience, Joel describes this coming day in terms of the devastation carried out by an invading army: "The land is like the garden of Eden before them, but behind them a desolate wilderness" (2:3). No one would be able to withstand this army sent by God. "For the day of the LORD is great and very awesome; who can endure it?" (2:11).

With this coming day of devastation in view, Joel calls on God's people to respond by turning to

the Lord in repentance. "Yet even now,' declares the Lord, 'return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; and rend your hearts and not your garments.' Return to the LORD your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love; and he relents over disaster" (2:12–13).

While God is right to bring judgment upon sinners, his gracious desire is always that they will repent and return to him. The Apostle Peter echoes this sentiment in II Peter 3:9, where he references the great and final day of the Lord: "The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise ... but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance."

The Lord calls us to repent of our sin—our pride, our idolatry, our self-righteousness—and to return to him in contrition and faith. God is not looking for an outward show of piety or empty words of devotion. Rather, his concern is the condition of your heart—"Rend your hearts and not your garments." As God's Word reveals the depths of your sin, let your heart be truly broken, but let your brokenness draw you to the One who is "gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love" (Psalm 145:8–9).

The day of the Lord is a day of judgment upon the wicked; at the same time, it is a day of salvation and restoration for those whose trust is in the Lord. In Joel 2:25, God says to his people, "I will restore to you the years that the swarming locust has eaten, the hopper, the destroyer, and the cutter, my great army, which I sent among you." Throughout their history, God's people would experience times of discipline and refinement, and yet God's purpose through it all was to restore and bring them back into a right relationship with him.

This is the God we serve—the God who loves us enough to tell us the truth about our sin, to discipline us when we become comfortable with it, and to graciously call us back to himself. As we live in light of the coming day of the Lord, may we find our hope in the promise of Joel 2:32: "And it shall come to pass that everyone who calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved."

Moan serves Calvary Free Lutheran, Arlington, S.D.

Have you ever experienced the destruction of something you treasure? A book torn by a child. A family heirloom piece of fine China smashed. An irreplaceable photo destroyed by fire.

Amos announced the destruction of Israel to a people who had things humming along quite nicely. The reign of Jeroboam II was the longest of the Northern Kingdom of Israel, and it was prosperous. It was generally a time of peace with the surrounding nations. The Israelites were really living it up—enjoying the latest and greatest entertainment available.

But God was not pleased. He took farmer Amos from his flocks and fields and sent him as a prophet to the people of Israel.

JUDGMENT: THE LION'S WRATH

The first recorded words from Amos' mouth set the tone. "The LORD roars from Zion and utters his voice from Jerusalem; the pastures of the shepherds mourn, and the top of Carmel withers" (1:2, ESV).

Amos begins by painting a picture of who God is—a lion. At the sound of his almighty roar, all creation melts.

I can't help but think of Aslan in the *Chronicles of Narnia*. As the Pevensie children learn of Aslan, they wonder if he is safe. Mr. Beaver responds, "Who said anything about safe? 'Course he isn't safe. But he's good. He's the King, I tell you."

This is the God of Israel. He is good. He is King. But he is not safe.

For two chapters, Amos announces God's judgment. First, he announces judgment on the distant lands of Damascus, Gaza, and Tyre. Then he moves to the surrounding nations of Edom, Ammon, and Moab. Next, he reveals that even Jerusalem, home to the temple of the LORD, is not safe from God's wrath. Ultimately, Amos brings his message home and declares God's impending judgment on the Northern Kingdom of Israel (2:6–16).

God gives His reasons for judgment in chapters 3–6. God, who is slow to anger, gave his people many opportunities to repent. Still, Israel would not live in the justice and righteousness to which God had called them. The poor were being neglected. God's people were called to live in a manner set apart from the other nations, yet they adopted foreign gods and practices.

A key warning comes at the end of chapter 5 of the coming "day of the Lord." For the disobedient, it is not a pretty picture—darkness, a lion chase, a bear encounter, a serpent bite (5:18–20). God, who called Israel to justice and righteousness, now brings His just judgment down on them,

flooding Israel like an "ever-flowing stream."

Chapters 7–9 provide visions of the day of the Lord—it would be like devouring locust, like consuming fire, and like drought and famine. The drought and famine would not be of a physical nature, but a drought "of hearing the words of the LORD" (8:11). The most dreadful famine of all when the Lord no longer grants the presence of his life-giving Word.

RESTORATION: THE LION'S MERCY & GRACE

Eight and a half chapters of Amos reveal the coming judgment of God. Then, at the end of chapter 9, we get a glimpse of hope.

Three times in verses 11–15, God declares, "I will." Unlike the "I will" statements of judgment in the previous chapters, these are statements of grace and mercy. "I will raise up, repair, and rebuild ... I will restore the fortunes of my people ... I will plant them on their land."

Around 40 years after Amos spoke, Assyria swept in and wrought total destruction on the Northern Kingdom of Israel. Judah was also destroyed by Babylon 136 years later. Fire and famine consumed everything Israel treasured.

There were glimpses of restoration, such as when Nehemiah returned to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. But the restoration was not complete.

God withheld His Word for 400 years. Then he broke the silence through the Word in flesh—the Lion of Judah. Jesus brought restoration of justice and righteousness through his perfect life, suffering, death, and resurrection. He is the true King of Israel, exercising justice and righteousness. By faith, God's people receive the very justice and righteousness that they (we) fail to exercise. The Apostle Paul says concerning Christ's redemption, "It was to show [God's] righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus" (Romans 3:26).

The day of the Lord is coming! The Lion will sit in judgment. The same Lion will grant final restoration to his people. The ancient rhyme of Narnia rings a similar sound to the final chapters of Revelation:

Wrong will be right, when Aslan comes in sight,
At the sound of his roar, sorrows will be no more,
When he bares his teeth, winter meets its death,
And when he shakes his mane, we shall have spring
again.

The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe by C.S. Lewis

Pillman is an AFLC church planting pastor at Emmanuel Lutheran in Ankeny, Iowa.

THE NOT-SO-MINOR PROPHETS

AMOS



COMPLETE RESTORATION

BY PASTOR MATTHEW PILLMAN

THE NOT-SO-MINOR PROPHETS

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A CALL FOR JUSTICE

BY PASTOR BRETT BOE



On the day of George Floyd's death in Minneapolis, my wife and I stayed up late watching the Twin Cities news to absorb the magnitude of what was happening as people responded with anger, rioting, and destruction. The subsequent chatter about justice, racism, and that state of culture pressed many Christians to consider, or re-consider, their views. As Christians holding a biblical worldview, what should we believe and how should we act in light of the cultural issues dominating the day? Should an event in the news lead us to change our stance?

Knowing that I didn't want to dismiss every notion that led to discomfort as "just that woke garbage," I wanted to get to the heart of God's Word. The most helpful portion of Scripture in this quest turned out to be the prophetic books. The prophets have laced their writings with words like "justice" and "righteousness." I was especially blessed to consider how often the compassionate gaze of the Lord falls on those who are frequently taken advantage of by others. The Hebrew word for justice, *tsadeqah*, denotes a standard of righteous and equitable relations. It is a word that pulls together all of God's commands and forms a package of ideas that have the label, "This is right in the sight of God."

The Book of Micah, one of the Minor Prophets, includes the theme of justice. When we zoom into the passages where the Prophet Micah takes up the topic of justice, we see a clear picture of all parties involved and what biblical justice encompasses.

First, Micah emphasizes that justice is a personal issue. Perhaps the most well-known verse in this book is 6:8, "He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" I recall a song at a youth Bible camp with these words sung in a round. We love this verse because it summarizes the life of faith so well. C. Hassell Bullock, in his book *An Introduction to the Old Testament Prophetic Books*, writes, "Underlying the entire book is an ethical system that has its roots in the covenant faith, the essence of which is so unmistakably distilled in 6:8." In this verse, the word "do" is attached to justice. Justice is something to be done. Our personal actions come

into play in light of this verse. In our actions, are we doing what is right?

Second, the prophet Micah emphasizes that justice is a community issue. When the Lord created Adam, he noted the need for companionship. We are hardwired by God for community. In Micah 3, the prophet calls out the rulers in his midst. He writes, "Is it not for you to know justice?—you who hate the good and love the evil" (vv. 1-2). The rulers in Micah's day had made "crooked all that is straight" (3:9). These rulers, in throwing around the weight of their power and influence, were taking advantage of their people. In their minds, they could get away with it. But the Lord tapped Micah to call out the leaders for how they detested justice. Their unjust actions, in twisting God's commands, had a negative impact on the health of the community.

Finally, the prophet Micah emphasizes that justice is rooted in the character of God. God perfectly carries out justice. The prophet writes, "I will bear the indignation of the LORD because I have sinned against Him, until He pleads my case and executes justice for me. He will bring me out to the light, and I will see His righteousness" (7:9, NASB). Essentially, justice is "executed" by the Lord for the benefit of Micah. This is often the ingredient that is missing in modern-day discussions about justice. But when we see God as the one who executes justice perfectly, we can rest in the fact that he deals with all evil. This is a comforting truth that prepares us to receive another truth about justice: God justifies us and declares us "right" on account of the blood of his Son. In Romans 3:26, the Apostle Paul writes that God is "just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus."

The Prophet Micah pulls together all angles of justice: it's a personal issue; it's an issue that impacts community; and God, who is over all, executes perfect justice. Every command of God pulled together provides us with a biblical view of justice. We must insist on justice in our personal lives and in the lives of those in our community, even as we wait upon the Lord, through the eyes of faith, to execute justice.

Boe serves Solid Rock Free Lutheran, Anoka, Minn.

First, go read Habakkuk. It's short.

Now that you're back, did you notice? Habakkuk managed, in a few short pages, to capture the anguish, struggle, and joy of faith in God. He wrote his book when a rival people group (the Chaldeans) was about to attack and bring God's punishment to the rebellious Israelites. Habakkuk was scared, understandably, but he was also mad at God. How could God use this violent tribe of idol worshipers to bring judgment? God was not acting in a way that made sense! There was too much injustice, too much pain, and not enough visible *saving* going on. Habakkuk questions God, who ends his answer by pointing out that all the earth should "keep silence before him (2:20)." Being humbled, like it or not, is the bedrock on which faith can be built, and being silent before God is the essence of humility. It allows Habakkuk (and us) the space to know that God's ways are perfect, far beyond understanding and far beyond finding out.

When Habakkuk says, "the righteous shall live by his faith" (2:4), he is also talking about learning, day-by-day, to live like God's ways are higher than his. He says, "I will take joy in the God of my salvation" (3:18), but his whole book makes clear that in the face of the Chaldean invasion, this was no easy matter. We have similar work to do. This is the work of rejoicing in God, of depending on God and acting like it in the face of stressful circumstances, bad drivers, irritating noises, upset plans, and deep sorrow. It is an ongoing discipline, one never perfected in this life. In fact, it is impossible and fruitless unless it flows from a still-deeper layer of life by faith.

The notion of "living by faith" always confused me until I finally understood that its essence is not the actions that I take. Instead, living by faith most deeply means being *made alive* by faith and resurrected in the life of Christ. Let me also define what "living by faith" is *not*. It is not "believing enough." It is not maintaining a vague feeling of connectedness to God, nor is it subscribing to the correct iteration of every doctrine. It is not an unwavering (or wavering) act of the will—in fact, it is not anything I do. I suppose I'm connecting to my Lutheran forebears when I say "faith is a gift." And it is. Living by faith is the gift of supernaturally

enabled, acknowledged dependence on God, who is my life, and on the historical fact of Jesus' death and resurrection. It is dependence on God's promise that I have died but now live because Christ lives (Colossians 3:3). It is dependence on the God who has bound himself to me by an oath, by a covenant sealed with blood.

This is good news, because any of the ordinary and profoundly painful circumstances of life have the power to erode our feelings of trust. Maybe it's a divorce, maybe an illness, or the long denial of a deep desire. It could be the death of someone you love, poverty, depression, or even just simple fear of the unknown. And where is God? *Why* does he not act? His plans seem both slow and absurd; is he really here? Can we depend on him? Can you (with Habakkuk) say, "Even if the harvest doesn't come, even if my enemies overwhelm me, even if everything goes wrong—still, whatever the circumstances, God is good"? And maybe you can't currently take joy in God's presence or bring yourself to act in ways that acknowledge his faithfulness; maybe doubt has the upper hand for now. Just know this—your brave statement that yes, you still believe—that isn't the important thing. Let me tell you a story to explain.

Flash-forward to John 6. Jesus is making some seriously controversial statements. The ruling classes are after him, and he is about to get mobbed, captured, and killed. He asks his disciples whether they'd still follow him, and all they can muster up to say is that, basically, they don't have any better options. "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life" (v. 68). That's a place I've been. It's not much in the way of trust. It feels like a last-ditch thing, admitting that I'm pretty much at my wits end, barely hanging on. It's also the truth: He has the words of eternal life. And even that lackluster, half-desperate expression of dependence (a tiny mustard seed) is enough, because he is enough.

In this "life by faith," your true life is hidden with Jesus, the keeper of your faith. *He* is its author and finisher—you have only to humble yourself.

His are the everlasting ways.

Thompson is a member of Faith Free Lutheran, Kalispell, Mont.

THE NOT-SO-MINOR PROPHETS

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LESSONS IN LIFE BY FAITH

BY RENAH THOMPSON

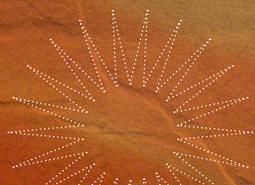
THE NOT-SO-MINOR PROPHETS

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JUDGMENT & HOPE

BY PASTOR RYAN PATENAUDE



Perusing the creative works hanging outside of the high school art room, I got a real kick out of a passionate piece that demanded there be “no judgement.” I wonder if her teacher, respecting her wish, refrained from telling her that there is no “e” in judgment. There are few things more popular to decry these days than judgment. To judge is a right that we want only for ourselves. Allow me to point out all the things that are wrong with the world while insisting that no one gets to say anything is wrong with me. Part of the reason we bristle against another’s judgment is that all human beings judge with a certain degree of hypocrisy. When confronted with wrongdoing, our instinctual response is to return fire. “Oh, I’m selfish? Who are *you* to judge?” These words played in my head just last night.

But there is one judge against whom such a retort cannot be made. God is the judge who has done no wrong. God is always the offended—never the offender. His judgments are just and fair. He never doles out more than is deserved. He only ever balances the scales. Human revenge exceeds the crime, but God’s vengeance only brings justice.

One of the most poignant descriptions of God’s judgment comes from the Book of Zephaniah. The bulk of the Prophet Zephaniah’s message is the impending judgment of God. He speaks of the coming “day of the LORD,” when God will visit the earth with his wrath. There are two layers of judgment predicted. One is local and selective. God speaks of judging individual nations and subsets of people. These events came to pass when the Babylonians destroyed Judah within 30 years of the prophecy.

But elsewhere, Zephaniah speaks of total desolation. He writes, “‘I will utterly sweep away everything from the face of the earth,’ declares the LORD. ‘I will sweep away man and beast; I will sweep away the birds of the heavens and the fish of the sea, and the rubble of the wicked. I will cut off mankind from the face of the earth,’ declares the LORD” (1:2–3). God’s perfectly chosen words are absolute and succinct. He will absolutely remove everything from the face of the earth. He will essentially undo three days of creation; man and beast, trees and plants, and even the birds and the fish will be destroyed. This destruction will exceed the destruction of the flood.

In 1:18, he writes, “In the fire of his jealousy, all the earth shall be consumed; for a full and sudden

end he will make of all the inhabitants of the earth.” He repeats this promise in 3:8. By reading this, we have evidence that such total destruction has not happened. These things are yet to come. The *Lutheran Study Bible* says of Zephaniah, “Readers can easily feel overwhelmed by the descriptions of God’s wrath.”

Isn’t that the only appropriate response? Isn’t that how we are supposed to feel? Rather than recoil and defend, we ought to mourn and weep. We are guilty of the same sins. We fail to “seek the LORD or inquire of him” (1:6). We, too, are complacent (1:12). We accept no correction and doubt the LORD (3:2). If we beheld the LORD, we, like Isaiah, would declare, “Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips” (Isaiah 6:5).

But judgment is not the only theme in Zephaniah’s prophecy. The threat of judgment is coupled with a message of hope. God does not delight in the death of the wicked (Ezekiel 33:11). His hope is that the threat of judgment will cause people to repent. In chapter 2, he implores, “Gather together, yes, gather, O shameless nation, before the decree takes effect—before the day passes away like chaff—before there comes upon you the burning anger of the LORD, before there comes upon you the day of the anger of the LORD. Seek the LORD, all you humble of the land, who do his just commands; seek righteousness; seek humility; perhaps you may be hidden on the day of the anger of the LORD” (2:1–3).

Quick! Before the day of the LORD, repent! We should have this urgency as we share the gospel with our neighbors. Just as God preserved a remnant of faithful Jews when Babylon destroyed Judah, God promises to save a remnant of faithful people when he destroys the world. Zephaniah speaks of a day when the Lord takes away his judgments against them (3:15). On that day it shall be said, “The LORD your God is in your midst, a mighty one who will save; he will rejoice over you with gladness; he will quiet you by his love; he will exult over you with loud singing” (3:17).

Let us wait eagerly for that day! Let the threat of his judgment drive us to the cross where his wrath was poured out on his son, Jesus, so that on the great day of the LORD, we will have nothing to fear.

Patenaude serves West Prairie Free Lutheran, Kindred, N.D.

If you remember the old movie *Field of Dreams*, you will recall a famous line that goes, “If you build it, they will come.” Though this quote may be original to the movie, the principle of the statement is not. We see God share this same principle with Noah as preparations are made for the flood. God tells Noah to build an ark big enough for his family and two of every kind of creature on the earth. Noah built the ark, and the animals came (Genesis 6).

This principle of preparation is repeated throughout the Bible: God prepares—or commands preparation—and fulfillment follows. We see this principle in action in Exodus 40, as God commanded Moses to prepare the tabernacle before the glory of the Lord would fill it: “Thus Moses finished the work. Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle. Moses was not able to enter the tent of meeting because the cloud had settled on it, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle” (vv. 33–35).

There are several situations where God commands his people to make preparations before he moves on with the next step in his plan. This is precisely what we see happening in the prophecy of Zechariah. The people had returned to Israel from their exile in Babylon, but they had allowed apathy and lethargy to take hold, delaying the completion of the temple. And as one commentator observed, “Rather than exhorting them to action with strong words of rebuke, Zechariah seeks to encourage them to action by reminding them of the future importance of the temple. The temple must be built, for one day the Messiah’s glory will inhabit it” (*The Open Bible*, introduction to Zechariah).

As many in our Christian culture just don’t recognize, the failures of today directly impact the events of tomorrow. If you build it, they will come. But if you don’t, then God’s promises for tomorrow are thwarted—or at least delayed. We often forget how uniquely bound together our obedience is to God’s promises. This is the challenge we see delivered in the message of the Prophet Zechariah. He reminds Israel that the project of rebuilding the temple is not only for their good but is an act of obedience in preparation for the coming Messiah, promised long ago. For when they build it, he will come.

But lest we fall for the time-honored deception, “Pray as if all depended on God; work as if all depended on you,” Zechariah reminds Israel that all depends on

God—and they are simply the laborers of his field. They weren’t playing some synergistic game with God where he fills in the gaps and follows their lead. No. They were, as the Apostle Paul explains in Philippians 2:12, “working out their salvation with fear and trembling.”

God had his plan in place for eons prior. The promise had been made hundreds of years before. Consider these prophecies:

“Then a shoot will spring from the stem of Jesse, And a branch from his roots will bear fruit” (Isaiah 11:1).

“Behold, the days are coming,” declares the LORD, ‘When I will raise up for David a righteous Branch; And He will reign as king and act wisely And do justice and righteousness in the land’” (Jeremiah 23:5).

“For He grew up before Him like a tender shoot, And like a root out of parched ground” (Isaiah 53:2).

“In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch of David to spring forth; and He shall execute justice and righteousness on the earth” (Jeremiah 33:15).

And now, as the exiles returned, the Father needed his people to do their part in preparation for the culmination of God’s own promises. The Holy Spirit prompted Zechariah to remind Israel of this promise and plan. “Now listen, Joshua the high priest, you and your friends who are sitting in front of you—indeed they are men who are a symbol, for behold, I am going to bring in My servant the Branch” (Zechariah 3:8), and “Behold, a man whose name is Branch, for He will branch out from where He is; and He will build the temple of the LORD” (6:12).

God will have his way in the whole scheme of things, but he often expects his children to play their part in the preparations. And when the Branch (Jesus), our Messiah, did finally come, he carried on this sobering and noble principle. After all, how many of Jesus’ miracles involved the obedience and cooperation of the disciples, or some unexpected observer? God commanded Moses to build the tabernacle so that his glory could come and fill it. Zechariah challenged Israel to complete their mission of rebuilding and promised the Messiah would come to fill it. Likewise, we are called to trust and obey (as the old song says), for we don’t know exactly what God is waiting to do when we’re done.

Johnson serves Living Faith Free Lutheran, Larimore, N.D.

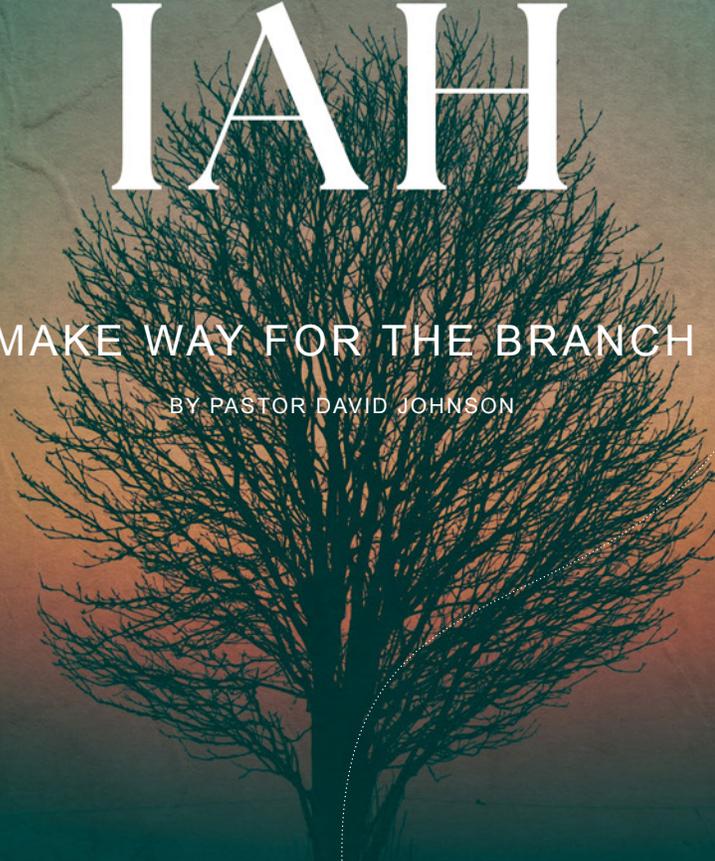
THE NOT-SO-MINOR PROPHETS

ZE CH AR IAH



MAKE WAY FOR THE BRANCH

BY PASTOR DAVID JOHNSON





• BIBLE COLLEGE

It has been a summer and a semester since we revealed our renewed strategic plan, which will be updated annually and is reviewed constantly so its contents never gather dust on a shelf. New initiatives—designed to better equip more students for the benefit of families, congregations, and communities—are well under way. One of those initiatives is adherence to our intentionally narrow focus on the Bible and ministry, preparing students for any other potential training or vocation. Another deals with financial stability and how we work with friends, donors, and alumni.

The biggest news of last fall was that FLBC received approval to offer an Associate and Bachelor’s Degree in Bible and Ministry starting next fall. The majority of our students “start here” then “go anywhere, grounded in God’s Word,” but now the portion of our student body that would have otherwise pursued Bible- and ministry-related studies elsewhere will be able to do so on our AFLC campus. We are able to provide a focused selection of advanced Bible and ministry courses on top of what we already teach, and that excites us all, especially those who would like more advanced study and men who are preparing for seminary.

Additionally, all students will benefit from an emphasis on teaching students to read, write, think, speak, and listen, increasing their capacity for future study and congregational service. Students who already have some college credit will be able to benefit from that at FLBC, in addition to having advanced versions of basic courses. Some of these courses have been talked about for years (or even offered in the past). For example:

History and Geography of the Biblical World: This course offers students a foundational framework for future study of the Bible and the biblical world. Particular attention will be given to the social, political, geographical, and historical background of the ancient biblical world. (Freshman Core Class)

Apologetics, Ethics, and Christian Thought: Students will apply prior exegetical study to life in the family, congregation, and society. Students will learn the benefits and limitations of giving reasons and answers to simplify and explain the Christian worldview while learning various frameworks for apologetics and ethics. (Sophomore Core Class)

Philosophy of Worship: This course offers an in-depth study of biblical components of worship and of Christian music. It traces our musical lineage and elements of corporate worship through the Scriptures, the early church, the Reformation, and today. (Worship Ministry Elective)

We anticipate an incoming class similar to this year—our largest in recent years—with expanded offerings likely to increase retention and freshman enrollment. We also anticipate 10–20 juniors and seniors on campus, most of whom will continue to live on campus. If interested, find out more at FLBC.edu/academics.

One necessary step to expand our course offerings was adding faculty, including the ability to split some larger classes into manageable sizes conducive to interaction and engagement. Some of this has been accomplished with high-quality adjuncts, but we decided to call one more full-time faculty member. We are thankful for Dr. Jarrod Hylden, who accepted that call this winter. Hylden comes to us with his family from two beloved congregations in southeast South Dakota, Skrefsrud and Immanuel, of rural Beresford and Centerville, respectively.

Our discipleship-learning community approach to Christian higher education has been something that sets us apart. This year, we have made significant improvements in this area under the watch of Jeremy Larson, a first-year seminarian who serves as director of discipleship. Each week, students gather in groups of two or three with local mentors. Together, they walk through a chapter of *Discipleship Essentials* by Greg Ogden. The book provides a slightly different format and context for learning and applying what students are already learning in class. Group members pray for each other and hold each other accountable in their daily walk with the Lord. D-Groups have become another example of incarnational ministry at FLBCS.

FLBCS links

- **Discipleship Groups:** Jeremy Larson describes the mission of the Discipleship Group ministry: vimeo.com/flbc/discipleshipintro
- **Refer a student:** You can connect high school students and recent graduates with FLBC at: flbc.edu/refer
- **Giving:** Are you interested in supporting the ministry of FLBCS? Donations can be made online at: flbc.edu/donate

Strategies & kingdom service.

• SEMINARY

The Free Lutheran Seminary continues to prepare servant pastors for free and living congregations. FLS has been doing so for nearly 60 years, and the need for well-equipped pastors is as great now as it was then. Our graduates will work within congregations as they seek together to reach a world broken by sin and crippled by despair.

Over three years of classroom studies, students learn the original biblical languages and incorporate that training in verse-by-verse study of Scripture. In systematic classes, they learn to celebrate the broad common ground shared by all Christians while appreciating the distinctives of Lutheran doctrine. Historical classes teach students the world of the Bible, the history of the Christian church and its theology, and our doctrinal heritage as Free Lutherans. All such studies are designed to be applied in the context of real congregations made up of real people with real needs, and students are sharpened by congregational service during seminary and a year-long congregational internship in year four.

While all such instruction is practical, one set of classes equips future pastors to address challenges and opportunities head-on. Some of these are:

Pastoral Counseling: This class instructs students on a variety of parish counseling issues, such as pre-marriage, marriage, baptism, and grief.

Discipleship and Servant Leadership: A study of the effective use of congregational resources to care for converts and disciple them. Discipleship is combined with basic leadership training and strategic analysis in the biblical equipping of the saints.

Evangelism and Apologetics: This course introduces students to a variety of evangelism techniques and considerations, along with the right place of reasons and answers in evangelism. Students will learn how to identify and answer essential questions asked by unsaved souls and questioning Christians.

• Giving and Subsidy Requests

Unlike most ministries, our Bible College and Seminary receives a significant portion of its income from student charges. Students pay tuition, room, board, and fees for an education, a place to live, food to eat, mature mentors, and facilities that are both beautiful and clean.

Just like all ministries, we couldn't do what we do without you. Donors provide funds to keep students' charges low and scholarship funds to help students pay that amount. FLBC is the least expensive (and among the most valuable) institution of higher education in the region, and FLS students benefit from an education that leaves them well-trained and unencumbered with student debt.

We thank God for the many donors who give to make FLBCS work. The monthly chart in *The Lutheran Ambassador* reflects only a part of that giving, and we are thankful for every gift and every giver, promising to make the most of every dollar or hour invested by our supporters. You can contact Sherry Mork, director of donor relations, to find out more about ways to help FLBCS through general gifts, annual giving, endowments, or planned gifts and estates (sherry.mork@flbc.edu).



The Board of Trustees of the Free Lutheran Bible College and Seminary include (from left) Pastor Jason Gudim, Donald Balmer, Nathan Dalager, Pastor Alan Arneson, Pastor Steve Snipstead, Gary Erickson, and Philip Johnson.

Prayer requests

- Pray for seminarian Scott Olson, who is completing his year of internship at Our Saviour's Lutheran, Thief River Falls, Minn., and Reiner Lutheran, Goodridge, Minn.
- Pray for the Board of Trustees as they steward the mission of FLBCS and oversee the implementation of the strategic plan.
- Pray for Dr. Hylden, his wife Elise, and their five children as they make plans to move to the Twin Cities in June.
- Pray for the FLBC Concert Choir as they travel to Scandinavia in May.
- Pray for the Cross-Cultural Missions class traveling with AFLC Journey Missions to Oaxaca, Mexico, in March.
- Pray for students, staff, and faculty as they seek to stand against cultural pressures of conformity and compromise.



Youth and the church.

BY ADAM McCARLSON

As I began my position as director for AFLC Youth Ministries in July 2023, one of my priorities was to revisit our mission, core values, and long-term goals. Throughout that process, it was clear that the AFLC's emphasis on the local congregation is something that applies to our national Youth Ministries' office as well. While we put on various events or programs—like the FLY Convention, FLY Beyond, Youth Workers Weekends, or the Apprenticeship Program—an important way we carry out our mission is in the local congregation. Each congregation is called to do the work to win, build, equip, and multiply teens in Christ Jesus.

One way you can partner with us is through prayer. As God has called teens to be part of the body of believers in your church, pray that God will be working in their hearts and minds. Pray that teens will believe the gospel and take comfort in the promises of forgiveness and salvation found in the Word of God. Pray that God will help the saints in your congregation, including yourself, to take up their responsibility to pass on the faith to the coming generations. Pray that the parents of teens will not lose heart but continue to disciple their teens with humility and intentionality, relying on the strong arms of their heavenly Father.

Another way to partner with us is by getting to know the teens in your own congregation. It's sometimes tempting to think that there is someone else who would be better at caring for teens. I've heard from many adults that they don't think they could do youth ministry because they are too old or irrelevant. But this isn't true. If God has called teenagers to your congregation, then he is calling you to play a part in their lives, even if you already have a youth director or youth pastor. You might not teach confirmation, start a Bible study for high schoolers, or hop on a bus to go with them to the FLY Convention, but you can be part of your church's culture to welcome teens as valued and important members of your congregation. In Christian Smith's book *Soul Searching*, he says that congregations are uniquely positioned "to embrace youth, to connect with adolescents, to strengthen ties between adults and teenagers." Get to know the teens in your congregation by name. Make it a point to have at least one conversation with a teenager each Sunday. Reach out to a teen and ask them how you could be praying for them. Identify areas of ministry in your congregation where you could invite teens to participate or serve with the rest of the body of Christ.

AFLC Youth Ministries is thankful for all the ways our AFLC family supports our ministry. Each month, we have donors, volunteers, and congregations who show up to make all of our efforts and goals possible. It's a humbling thing to be the recipient of God's provision that comes through so many different people and congregations. In Ephesians 2, Paul describes members of the congregation as "fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God" (v. 19) who, in Christ, are being "built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit" (v. 22). This description includes every person in your congregation, from the smallest baptized baby to the most experienced parishioner, and all of the teenagers in between. Your congregation is a beautiful place for teens to hear the Word of God, receive God's good gifts through the sacraments, and be discipled in a community of believers. May we all see the ways God may be using us to care for the spiritual lives of the teens in our midst.

Youth Ministries Programs

- **FLY Convention:** The biennial youth gathering of the AFLC that provides congregations with a tool for winning the lost, building the believer, and encouraging student disciple-making.
- **FLY Beyond:** The national youth equipping conference of the AFLC in a small-group environment for a powerful week of spiritual growth.
- **Youth Worker Weekends:** A training and refreshing event for vocational and volunteer youth leaders.
- **Apprenticeship Program:** Providing on-the-job training in youth ministry in a local congregation.

McCarlson is the director of AFLC Youth Ministries.

Providing needed training.

BY PASTOR RANDY NELSON

What is one thing you want to change in your life (or ministry) now that you have attended a disciple equipping workshop?

“Intentionality. I know that I am called to love others and to share Jesus with others, but upon self-reflection, it’s pretty clear that I am failing because of my lack of intentionality—not focusing on why God has placed me right where I should be nor on how to use my place and time to minister and reach those around me for the glory of God. . . . If we are to reach others, it will be work, and it may not work out the way you want it to, or it could be messy; but give the effort and leave the results to the Lord.”

—Brian Pilon, Helmar Lutheran Church, Newark, Ill.

These are the kinds of responses that AFLC Evangelism and Discipleship (AED) is working to address as we seek to fulfill our mission to “encourage, equip, and assist our AFLC congregations and pastors in making and equipping disciples who make and equip disciples.” To that end, AED is focusing its efforts on two specific areas to accomplish this goal. First, we want to understand the rapidly changing culture that we are trying to reach, determine how best to minister to it, and then communicate these findings to our AFLC churches. Second, we want to provide and recommend disciple equipping training and resources to our congregations through our website and other online mediums, in-person training, and digital recordings of our own disciple equipping content.

Over the last year, we have presented our foundational disciple equipping workshop, “Living out your faith in a post-Christian culture.” This workshop includes three, three-hour sessions that focus on living as a disciple, being equipped to share your faith, and engaging your community for Christ. We have presented this training in multiple congregations in Minnesota, Illinois, North Dakota, and South Dakota.

Based on feedback from many congregations, we are in the process of testing a new workshop on biblical principles of church leadership. We have seen and heard that there is a gap in training and equipping lay leaders, which has become a critical need in our congregations as the shortage of pastors grows and the median age of current leaders continues to rise. Our hope is to have this three-hour workshop available as early as this coming fall.

It is our intent to continue making these workshops available for in-person presentations, but the reality is that it is costly and sometimes difficult for congregations to see strong turnouts for these types of events. With this in mind, we are developing a plan to produce our own digital content with the goal of having 30-minute segments available for congregations to use for their own training and equipping.

We are also excited to have Kirstie Skogerboe, the AFLC’s digital communications coordinator, working with us part time. She will help us further develop and update content on our website and better communicate with our congregations using a variety of mediums to better encourage, equip, and assist them in making and equipping disciples who make and equip disciples.



Nelson leads a disciple equipping workshop.

Pray for the work of AED

- That God would give each of us eyes to see the white harvest of lost souls in our own communities.
- That AFLC churches would continue to become known for how well they love their neighbors and communities.
- That God would bless AED’s efforts to encourage and equip AFLC churches with resources for evangelism and discipleship.

For resources and training information, visit the AFLC Evangelism and Discipleship website:
 • aflc.org/evangelism

Nelson is the director of AFLC Evangelism and Discipleship.

Seminary Symposium puts spotlight on ethics

The Free Lutheran Seminary hosted the annual Seminary Symposium Jan. 17–19 on the Plymouth, Minn., campus. Three guest instructors and a faculty member presented sessions on the theme of “Ethics.” Dr. Joel Biermann, professor of systematic theology at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, led two morning sessions: “The Three Estates and the Christian Life,” and “Virtue Ethics and the Church.” The afternoon sessions included Pastor Micah Klemme, “Technology and the Christian Life,” Pastor Nick Schultz, “The Psalms and Christian Ethics,” and Dr. Nathan Olson, “The Rise and Fall of Lutheran Pietism.” The symposium concluded with Georg Sverdrup Society forum on Jan. 19.



Clockwise, from top left: Dr. Nathan Olson, FLBCS faculty, led a session. Pastor Matthew Pillman, Ankeny, Iowa, took notes. Pastor Micah Klemme taught a session. Mike McCarlson, Webster, S.D., listened to Klemme’s session. Pastor Erin Tormanen, Stanley, N.D., looks over a session outline. Pastor Alex Amiot, Thief River Falls, Minn. Featured speaker Dr. Joel Biermann, taught two sessions. Pastor Nick Schultz, Chamberlain, S.D., led a session on the Psalms and how they relate to ethics. A participant asks a question. Pastor Terry Olson led a session during the Georg Sverdrup Society forum, which met on Jan. 19 during the (Photos by Olivia Pavlish.)





News from AFLC World Missions

◆ Pastor Nate and Rhoda Jore

Pastor Nate and Rhoda Jore, missionaries to Uganda since 2006, have been led by the Lord to end their service as AFLC missionaries. Currently on a one-year furlough since last summer, the Jores are considering several ministry opportunities based in the United States.

“World Missions deeply appreciates their more than 17 years of service in Uganda,” said Pastor Earl Korhonen, executive director.

The Jore’s furlough runs through June 2024, and they have requested an opportunity to return to Uganda as a family to pack up belongings, say goodbye, and close up their time in Uganda. Members of the World Mission Board of Directors have granted their request to continue service with World Missions through July to allow them this time to travel back to Uganda. The Jores will continue to need personal support funds from AFLC World Missions through the end of July.

World Missions requests prayer for the Jore family during this time of transition as they seek God’s guidance and direction for their future work, as well as prayer for the work in Uganda.

◆ Pastor Matthew and Ednay Abel

AFLC missionaries to Paraguay, Pastor Matthew and Ednay Abel and their family returned to Villarrica, Paraguay, on Jan. 9 following a four-month furlough.

◆ Journey Missions

Several ministry assistants are volunteering with AFLC Journey Missions in January and February. Zach and Carey Ritland, members of Salem Lutheran, Radcliffe, Iowa, are working in Curitiba and Campo Mourão, Brazil; and Villarrica, Paraguay. Logan and Trevor Blom, Farmington, Minn., will join them for the month of February.



Support the AFLC’s magazine

The AFLC’s monthly magazine, *The Lutheran Ambassador*, is free for all subscribers. The ministry is subsidized by your gifts. Contact lasubscriptions@afcl.org for more information on giving to our ministry. Or, visit our website at afcl.org/lutheran-ambassador.

PEOPLE & PLACES

Pastor Steve Carlson was installed January 7 at Peace Lutheran, Canal Winchester, Ohio, with Pastor Earl Korhonen, executive director of AFLC World Missions, officiating.

Tamarack Lutheran, Tamarack, Minn., was removed from the congregational roster after several years of inactivity and many failed attempts to contact the congregation.

Pastor Eric Johnson, Mesa, Ariz., was removed from the clergy roster at his request. Pastor Johnson serves The Source Church, Mesa, Ariz.

Pastor Matthew Quanbeck, Laurel, Neb., was removed from the clergy roster at his request. He has resigned from United Lutheran, Laurel, Neb., to take a position at First City Church in Bellevue, Neb.

Augustana Lutheran, Duluth, Minn., has changed its name to Midway Christian Fellowship. The congregation is served by Pastor Kenny Hale.

Pastor Earl and Joan Korhonen and **Pastor Craig and Cathe Johnson** traveled to Chirala, India, January 10–25 to lead theological training sessions for the AFLC-India pastors and Bible women. Korhonen, executive director of AFLC World Missions, taught sessions on the Apostle’s Creed. Johnson, chairman of the World Missions Board of Directors, taught sessions on the Book of Galatians. The four also visited several of the 55 AFLC-India congregations.

AFLC Evangelism and Discipleship will host a church leadership workshop March 2 on the campus of the Free Lutheran Bible College, Plymouth, Minn., for congregations in the Minneapolis district.



Pastor Michael Flechsig

Pastor Michael Flechsig, 65, of El Campo, Texas, died Dec. 18, 2023, in a motorcycle accident. Born on Dec. 26, 1957, in Palatine, Ill., he was the son of Chester and Arlene Flechsig.

He graduated from the Christian Outreach School of Ministry with a bachelor of divinity and was ordained to the ministry in 1990. He served as a missionary from 1990 until 1997, including in Brazil, where he met Isane. They married soon after. Along with their two daughters, they moved to Illinois in 1997, where Michael drove trucks and served as an elder at New Hope Church, Fox River Grove, Ill. He answered another call to ministry in 2008, serving the Association of Free Lutheran Congregations of Ortle Free Lutheran Church, Ortle, S.D., for three years; Good Shepherd Lutheran, Pleasanton, Texas, for four years; Good Shepherd Lutheran, Blackduck, Minn., for seven years; and Faith Lutheran Church in El Campo, Texas, until the day of his passing. Throughout his time serving all over the country, Pastor Mike made a point to minister in nursing homes, children’s after-school programs, and motorcycle clubs. He dedicated more than 14 years of pastoral ministry and never wavered in his fervor to reach lost people for the cause of Christ.

Throughout his life, Michael’s commitment to the gospel of Jesus Christ was evident. He desperately wanted everyone he met to know that there is a free gift of forgiveness, mercy, and love afforded by the death and resurrection of Jesus, and all who seek God can find him. He was a devoted husband, a loving father, and an enthusiastic grandfather. But above all of those things, he was a follower of Jesus and loved him with all of his heart.

Surviving are his wife, Isane; two daughters, Terry Ann (Elika) Korhonen, and Amanda (Daniel) Owen; seven grandchildren; and one brother, James (Audrey) Flechsig.

The service was held Dec. 29 at First Baptist Church, Pleasanton, Texas, with Pastor Jason Holt, AFLC presidential ministry associate, officiating. Burial was in St. John Lutheran Cemetery, Jourdanton, Texas. The family wishes to express their heartfelt gratitude for all the love and support that have been offered in this tragedy. Praise the Lord for Michael’s life and for his wonderful legacy and testimony.

DECEMBER MEMORIALS

Bible College
Martin and Lillian Bergstedt
Phyllis Johnson
Ruth Claus
Betty Christopherson
Kevin McGinnity
Allen Jones
John Larson

Lutheran Ambassador
Arley Hartsoch
Parish Education
Betty Christopherson
World Missions
Pastor Alvin and Frances Grothe

Home Missions
Pastor Paul Nash
Gordon Bloomquist

Seminary
David Faldet
Loretta Engebretson

FLAPS
Larry Kensinger

AFLC BENEVOLENCES January 1-December 31, 2023

| FUND | REC'D IN DECEMBER | TOTAL REC'D TO DATE | PRIOR YEAR-TO-DATE |
|---------------------|-------------------|---------------------|--------------------|
| General Fund | \$43,157 | \$424,138 | \$445,700 |
| Evangelism | 16,572 | 118,802 | 133,330 |
| Youth Ministries | 12,156 | 135,252 | 154,893 |
| Parish Education | 22,100 | 155,571 | 187,317 |
| Seminary | 80,211 | 325,732 | 254,798 |
| Bible College | 109,967 | 468,173 | 615,007 |
| Home Missions | 43,000 | 329,029 | 402,444 |
| World Missions | 71,742 | 425,379 | 500,954 |
| WM Personal Support | 150,509 | 851,672 | 763,663 |
| TOTALS | \$549,413 | \$3,233,747 | \$3,458,106 |

For additional financial information for each department, go to www.aflc.org/giving

Unity in the congregation.

BY PASTOR LLOYD QUANBECK

A year or so ago, while seeking spiritual refueling during a sabbatical, I read *The Flourishing Pastor* by Tom Nelson. He began by describing “three perilous paths” for pastors—the celebrity, the visionary, and the lone ranger. A pastor can easily end up on any of these paths, being encouraged there by both his congregation and his ego. I am thankful that my years in seminary instilled in me an alternative path, that of the servant pastor. The Apostle Paul urges such a perspective in I Corinthians 1:10–17.

Acts 18 records that on Paul’s second missionary journey, he came to Corinth, where he stayed with Aquila and Priscilla, a Jewish couple. While there, he went to the synagogue each Sabbath and tried to persuade both Jews and God-fearing Greeks to believe in Jesus. Many of the Jews resisted his message, and so Paul was invited to a house to continue to teach. The leader of the synagogue and many others (Jews and Greeks) came to believe in Jesus, and a Christian congregation formed.

After spending a year and a half teaching at Corinth, Paul moved on. However, through individual messengers, he heard of significant problems in the congregation, including divisions among its members. So Paul wrote letters to them. Toward the beginning of I Corinthians, he addressed these divisions. His exhortation is equally applicable to congregations today.

(v. 10) Paul begins, “I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree, and that there be no divisions among you ...”

If your congregation is looking to Jesus as the Lord of each of you individually, then God will unify you and keep you from divisions. That doesn’t mean that you will

agree on everything; rather, you will be united on things that matter, and you will be willing to let go of things that don’t.

“... but that you be united ...” We are united or joined together in two ways. “In the same mind”—intellect in its judging faculty (principles) “and in the same judgment”—opinion, i.e., the application of those principles.

(v. 11) Paul explains that he has been informed by members of Chloe’s household “that there are quarrels” (strifes, contentions) “among you.”

(v. 12) “What I mean is that each one of you says, ‘I follow Paul,’ or ‘I follow Apollos,’ or ‘I follow Cephas,’ or ‘I follow Christ.’”

It seems that *everyone* in the congregation was choosing loyalty to a leader. This happens often; inevitably, different leaders at various times have a significant impact on people’s spiritual lives. So, what likely influences did each of these leaders have on this congregation?

- Paul had been the founding pastor at Corinth. And though he was not a powerful speaker (1:17, II Corinthians 10:10, 11:6), he led many to a saving faith in Jesus.

- Apollos, a more skilled orator, had helped some grow in their intellectual understanding and application of the Scriptures (3:6, Acts 18:24–28).

- Cephas (Peter) had likely appealed to those of Jewish heritage who may have been inclined to Jewish traditions and sometimes legalism (Galatians 2:11–13).

- And then there were those who claimed they just followed Christ; they may have (like some with charismatic leanings) seen themselves as more directly led by Jesus through the Holy Spirit.

In any congregation, similar loyalties can develop toward those who lead people to personal faith, who have impressive

speaking abilities, or who hold to tradition rather than change. And there can be those who claim a direct word from Jesus and need no other leader.

(v. 13) Paul confronts them, saying they have shifted away from their original focus—the Savior who died for them. He asks pointed questions: “Has Christ been divided?” (distributed in pieces). “Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?” The expected answer to all of these questions is no!

(vv. 14–16) Paul states clearly that he wants no part in causing divisions. No one should include him in such partisanship since he very rarely had a part in baptizing anyone, and baptism into the Christian faith is not dependent on the character of the one performing the ceremony.

(v. 17) “For Christ did not send me to baptize but to preach the gospel, and not with words of eloquent wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power.”

Paul here simplifies a description of his calling and ours as followers of Jesus Christ—preaching the gospel, declaring the good news that Jesus Christ died on the cross, providing forgiveness of sin, and eternal life for all who believe. If our focus shifts away from this, then we risk making the cross of Christ void, and, as J. B. Lightfoot writes, “it dwindle[s] to nothing and vanish[es] under the weight of rhetorical ornament and dialectic subtlety.”

In any congregation, responsibility falls on both pastors and parishioners to discourage any cult of personality and to encourage each other to use their God-given gifts to serve and to build up the body of Christ.

Quanbeck serves Maranatha Free Lutheran, Glyndon, Minn.

SOMETHING TO SHARE

The prayer paradox.

BY KIRSTIE SKOGERBOE

“**B**uenas tardes, Señora!” Josué called to a woman in her house. My husband and I were standing with him in the dirt alley of a low-income neighborhood in San José, Costa Rica. We were accompanying the recently retired director of the non-profit *El Nino y La Bola* (Boy with a Ball) on a prayer *caminata* to check in on moms and their kids. Josué and the woman exchanged updates on how they were doing; he empathized with her tiredness and asked about her children. She told him that her son, Ezekiel, was sick. This was particularly bad news because Ezekiel had planned to attend the organization’s Christmas party the next day. Now, he lay disconsolately on the couch with a fever.

Josué asked if we could come in to pray for him. I appreciated how seriously Josué took a mom’s concern and a boy’s desire, but I was surprised by the earnestness of his prayer. He prayed for Ezekiel as though his sickness really were a result of the Fall, and as though there were no question whether God saw and cared for this boy. In his prayer, Josué reminded God that Jesus told his followers that they’d heal people of illness in his name, as recorded in Mark’s Gospel. He commended the boy to God’s care, and we said goodbye.

As we walked away, Josué explained why he prayed the way he did. “It is not my responsibility whether God chooses to heal this child,” he said. “But it *is* my responsibility to ask for healing.”

Josué’s words have stayed in my heart because of how

often I have wondered how to pray. God, our Father, loves to give good gifts, but he doesn’t always give us what we ask for. When I was a child, I thought that “Thy will be done” was the most mature prayer. But at the same time, “You do not have because you do not ask” (James 4:2). Should I pray boldly or submissively? Which does he want from me?

The answer that Scripture gives us is not hidden. In fact, I can see it now in one of my favorite passages. Hebrews 4:15–16 says, “For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.” What kind of people are we? Weak, tempted, and in need. Those are three good reasons to submit ourselves to our Lord and his will. But what kind of Lord do we have? A sympathetic one, who is also “beset with weakness” (Hebrews 5:2), who knows what it is like to be tempted, and who invites us to approach his throne with confidence.

We do not need to be afraid of God’s “no.” He tells us to approach him boldly, with all his promises in hand. Ask for good gifts, and rejoice when they are given. If God, in his wisdom, says “no,” remember that Jesus heard the same answer in the garden, and it led to our salvation.

Skogerboe, the digital communications coordinator for the AFLC, lives in Santa Fe, New Mexico.