

# THE VOICE OF RENEWAL

*The Newsletter of Lutheran Lay Renewal of America*  
*Serving all Lutheran churches since 1971*

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## FROM OUR PRESIDENT

Greetings and blessings to everyone as we enter the season of Advent. As we prepare our hearts and minds for the most spectacular event and miracle that have happened throughout the history of all humankind, my heart soars with humble thankfulness. How Great is our God that He gave an unbelievable gift to the world - His Son, Jesus, who insures a heavenly home, forever, to all believers! Jesus came to us as a child and became the Light and hope of the World, magnified by the brilliant star in the Bethlehem skies at His birth.

*Behold , a virgin shall be with child, and shall bring forth a son, and they shall call His name Emmanuel, which being interpreted, is God with us. (Matthew 1:23 – King James).*

Families will gather, around the world, as the Advent season progresses to the twelve days of Christmas. May the wonder of Christ's birth, so long ago, continue to be a guiding light in all our hearts.

The wonder of Christ's love, for all of us, is a cornerstone in the ministry of Lutheran Lay Renewal of America as team members, at renewal weekends, share what Christ has done and is doing in their lives. Our Outreach Director, Bill Oehlschlager, continues to make contacts with pastors and their congregations from the East Coast to the West Coast to enable as many congregations, as possible, to have the opportunity to experience a Lay Renewal weekend, or the other ministries offered by LLRA.

As we approach the ending of 2017, I extend a heartfelt "thank you" to all of you who have been faithful through your financial contributions and your great prayer support. Both are imperative to our ministry's outreach and growth. We really do need your support, so please keep us close to your hearts and minds. We look to 2018 with anticipation of gifts that God has in mind for us.

Many blessings to all. Please pray for our nation and the entire Christian world.

Elaine Schomaker  
President of Lutheran Lay Renewal of America

## TRUST HIM

This has been a very difficult year. If ever I felt like I was being tested, this was it. My mother had been under hospice care for the last 10 months. In recent years, I've looked after her needs and made decisions on her behalf. If there was a problem, I usually could come up with a solution. But now I felt utterly helpless. It just broke my heart to see her deteriorate mentally and physically. I watched Mom come apart bit by bit like crumbs being picked off a loaf of bread. My once vibrant, intelligent mother could no longer remember what she had read or even how to turn on the TV. Dementia robs a person of their dignity. Losing my mom was one of my biggest fears. Now I asked the Lord to please take her to be with Him- where there is no more pain or tears. She finally went home in October. In addition, my husband lost both his parents this summer. We had 3 funerals within 5 months. So hard and so much sorrow to bear.

During this time, I had many conversations with the Lord. I pleaded, "Please help", "I don't understand", "What are you trying to show me Lord?" Ultimately, I concluded God was telling me to trust him and submit to His will. So even when I didn't understand, I would repeat the words from Psalm 31:14, NIV *"But I trust in you, O Lord; I say, 'You are my God.' My times are in your hand.* These words assured me that God is in control and I'm not-but His plan is always perfect.

The Bible cites many examples of people who took God at his word and trusted the Lord to do what he said. You can read about them in Hebrews 11, referred to as the Hall of Fame of Faith. However, as Advent begins, let's recall the faith of Mary and Joseph. A young Mary took God at His word that she would give birth to a son who would be called the Son of the Most High. Even though she was a virgin and didn't understand how this could happen, the angel assured her *"nothing will be impossible with God."* She submitted to God's will saying, *"Let it be as you have said"* (Lk.1:26-38, NIV). Also, Joseph was ready to divorce Mary when he learned of her pregnancy but the angel of the Lord told him in his sleep, not to be afraid to take Mary as his wife. She would bear a son, Immanuel, who would save the people from their sins. When Joseph woke *"he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him"* (Mt. 1:18-25,NIV). Beyond human logic, Mary and Joseph believed God at his Word. And because they did, we were given the greatest gift in Christ Jesus, our Lord and Savior.

I'm sure there are many of you going through your own personal trials right now. Like me, maybe you've questioned your situation and the Lord. Yet when our faith is weak, then we can begin to know the Lord's power to provide strength to get us through (2 Cor. 12:9-10, NIV). Some of the greatest blessings come by trusting with our hearts and not by sight. My Mom's last week on earth was very traumatic for me. Yet God gave me a precious gift. I was able to be there when Mom took her last breath. She was not alone.

Consequently, when life becomes overwhelming, remember the words of Proverbs 3:5-6 NIV.

***Trust in the LORD with all your heart  
and lean not on your own understanding;  
in all your ways submit to him,  
and he will make your paths straight.***

Rejoice!

Christ is Born!

Have a blessed Christmas!

Lori Sardiga  
Vice President of Lutheran Lay Renewal of America

## Living the Spirit's Gifts—The Additional Gospel

The New Testament word for grace is *charis*, used to describe God's free gift of salvation in Christ. The Apostle Paul uses *charisma* to describe personal gifts received from the Holy Spirit. The root for both forms is *chara*, meaning joy. God offers to all the gift of Christ's redeeming work and to individual believers the Spirit's gifts of changed motivations. We are saved by grace to live by grace—joyfully.

In First Corinthians 12 Paul describes two kinds of spiritual gifts. The first is manifestations of different energies and callings of believers to contribute to the common good in ministries of a congregation. The second is the "most excellent" gifts of love, faith and hope in Chapter 13. Paul calls these and other characteristics like joy, peace and patience (Galatians 5: 22) the product, the fruit of the Spirit's work within the believer's personality.

What are these positive characteristics? Over centuries of preaching they have been considered virtuous behavior, with the implication we are to do such good deeds. Exhortations frequently assume we are on our own to fight the good fight between our new nature in Christ and the old sinful nature that never goes away. But Paul believed that the Spirit helps to change our inner disposition, or heart, or feelings, that is, our motivations which drive our behaviors. This belief that the Spirit miraculously changes our human spirit (John 3: 6) is the additional Gospel we often overlook. From a renewed "inside" come outward good deeds, done joyfully without guilt.

The category for Christ's work is *justification*, being made right with God. The Spirit's work is *sanctification*, being made holy. Holy is not an attractive word for most Christians, because it is usually associated with doing good deeds and the struggle to do them on our own. The goal of becoming pure is overwhelming, especially when the focus is on the high standards of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount.

Paul stated the goal is to become more like Christ, as "we are being transformed into his likeness with ever increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit" (2 Corinthians 3: 16). The essence of God is love, and we can see in the Gospels that Jesus was loving, compassionate, patient, full of hope and focused on the joy of being in God's kingdom. The Spirit helps us grow in these inner characteristics. Referring to the Spirit whom the Father will send, Jesus promised his followers "I will not leave you as orphans" (John 14: 18). We are not on our own to live an increasingly fulfilling holy life. Such is the abundant life Jesus came to offer (John 10: 10) and the Spirit works to deliver.

Ask church people if they want to learn to have more love, joy, peace, patience and trust in their lives, and most will say yes, eagerly so. This outcome is what happens when believers grow in the fruit of the Spirit. To become more like Christ is to have the Spirit grow such fruit in the life of a believer. The present life-changing gifts of the Third Person of the Trinity are Good News in addition to the Gospel of eternal salvation by grace won by the Second Person, God's Son Jesus Christ. Both kinds of gifts come from God the Father out of love for his people.

The answer to how to become holy is to grow in the fruit of the Spirit. How to do that was not asked in our Lutheran heritage. But Luther knew the answer: "By the Word God creates and increases sanctification, causing it daily to grow and become strong in the faith and fruits of the Spirit." Here is how Luther described the outcome: "When the Spirit comes, he makes a pure, free, cheerful, glad, and loving heart—a conscience made righteous by grace, seeking no reward, fearing no punishment, doing everything with joy."

Luther also believed that the Spirit works mostly through the community of saints, which is the fellowship of the Holy Spirit. Growth in the Spirit happens when a community of believers learns from God's Word and share personal experiences of the Spirit's work within them.

Pastor Dave Luecke, Board Member  
Lutheran Lay Renewal of America

How does God help us to live out the Christian faith in our alive, joyful, enthusiastic way? Well, of course by giving the gift of the Holy Spirit. We at St. Paul's Evangelical Lutheran Church in Allison Park, Pa. wanted more awareness and experience of that Spirit in our lives. So, we invited Pastor David Luecke on behalf of Lutheran Lay Renewal to present a workshop, How to Spot the Holy Spirit at Work in Your Life, based on his book by the same title. We had the workshop on Saturday, August 19<sup>th</sup>. It was a marvelous experience and well attended. Our congregation received a grant from Thrivent to purchase 20 of Pastor Luecke's books. All in attendance were blessed by Pastor Luecke's presentation, materials, and book. It was a 5-hour workshop, which was just right. Those in attendance were so enthusiastic, that we continued the experience with a 6- week course, which I facilitated, on the book and workbook. Lively and God-centered discussions were the core of every meeting (as well as delicious snacks). We are approaching the final session, and there is interest in continuing a bi-monthly session on experiencing the fruit of the Spirit. Also, we are developing a Spiritual Ministry group at our congregation. I highly recommend Pastor Luecke, his book, and materials to help your congregation to wake up to the joy of Christ's Spirit in your midst, right now!

Pastor Fred Schenker, Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church, Wexford, PA

I want to express my thanks to Lutheran Lay Renewal and Pastor Dave Luecke for holding the Spot the Holy Spirit workshop at the North American Lutheran Seminary in Ambridge, PA on Saturday, October 7. We experienced the Holy Spirit in action that day. Even though the day had been planned differently for the group, the Holy Spirit led each of us to grow. Whether through conversational prayer, witnessing, discernment of call or encouragement, I felt the Holy Spirit's presence. May your ministries be richly blessed.

Diana Hall, St. Mark's Lutheran Church, Butler, PA



## A REFLECTION ON ADVENT & CHRISTMAS

Two thousand years ago, our Holy Father God chose a young virgin, named Mary, to be the one, in whom His Holy Spirit would place the beginning of one of the two biggest miracles of our Father God's love for His people here on earth. Our God sent His only Son to be the Savior of the world! What an incredible Gift we have been given!

This story is best told in Scripture.

Mathew 1:18-23, ESV tells us: "Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When His mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. And her husband, Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly. But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit; she will bear a son, and you shall call His Name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins." All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken to the prophet: (Isaiah 7:14, ESV) "Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a Son, and His Name shall be called Immanuel: (which means, God with us) When Joseph woke from sleep he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took his wife, but knew her not until she had had given birth to a Son; and he called His Name Jesus."

Luke 1:26-36, ESV tells us: "In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David; and the virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, "Hail, O favored one, the Lord is with you!" But she was greatly troubled at the saying, and tried to discern what sort of greeting this might be. And the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call His Name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to Him the throne of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to Him the throne of His father David, and He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of His kingdom there will be no end."

I cannot even begin to imagine what Mary was feeling or thinking. Elizabeth must have been beside herself also. When Mary went to visit her cousin, Elizabeth, the baby, that Elizabeth was carrying in her womb, leapt because he, John the Baptist, acknowledged that Mary was now carrying His Lord Jesus! That must have been a huge encouragement to Mary.

Every time I read these scriptures, I am overwhelmed that Our Heavenly Father loved us all so much, that He sent His Only Son Jesus Christ to earth to become our Lord and Savior. That He would allow His Son to suffer on the cross, taking all of the sins of the whole world on Himself, die and rise from the dead three days later so that we can live in eternity with Him!

May you all have the most blessed Christmas with Christ as the center of everything!

In His love,  
Liz Lawless, Newsletter Editor

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"This life therefore is not righteousness, but growth in righteousness, not health, but healing, not being but becoming, not rest but exercise. We are not yet what we shall be, but we are growing toward it, the process is not yet finished, but it is going on, this is not the end, but it is the road. All does not yet gleam in glory, but all is being purified." - Martin Luther

## How Martin Luther Preached about Christmas

The Protestant reformer loved the holiday, as these excerpts from his sermons show.

Paul L. Maier is the writer. Paul L. Maier is a former professor of ancient history at [Western Michigan University](#) and an editorial adviser for Christian History.

In the theological tumult that was Martin Luther's life, the great reformer seemed to be heartened each year by the great festivals of the church, particularly Advent and Christmas. The man who "invented" the Protestant parsonage was also sustained by a blazing sense of humor and a happy home life. It was open house all year in the large converted monastery at the east end of Wittenberg where Luther, his wife Katie, and their six children lived, along with numerous students who stayed there as well. One of them wrote that as Christmas approached, Luther grew increasingly cheerful: "All his words and songs and thoughts concerned the incarnation of our Lord. Then he sighed and said, 'Oh, we poor people that we should be so cold and indifferent to this great joy that has been given us. For this is indeed the greatest gift, which far exceeds all else that God has created. Yet we believe so sluggishly, even though the angels proclaim and preach and sing, and their lovely song sums up the whole Christian faith, for 'Glory to God in the highest' is the very heart of worship."

*Luther's writings contain a multitude of references to Advent and Christmas. The following excerpt comes from a sermon on the Nativity that he preached in 1530:*

If Christ had arrived with trumpets and lain in a cradle of gold, His birth would have been a splendid affair. But it would not be a comfort to me. He was rather to lie in the lap of a poor maiden and be thought of little significance in the eyes of the world. Now I can come to Him. Now He reveals Himself to the miserable in order not to give any impression that He arrives with great power, splendor, wisdom, and aristocratic manners. But upon His return on that Day, when He will oppose the high and the mighty, it will be different. Now He comes to the poor, who need a Savior, but then He will come as a Judge against those who are persecuting Him now.

In 1543, as Christmas approached, Luther gave a lecture on Isaiah 9:6 in which he portrayed Christ as a ladder: The Son of God did not want to be seen and found in heaven. Therefore He descended from heaven into this humility and came to us in our flesh, laid Himself into the womb of His mother and into the manger and went on to the cross. This was the ladder that He placed on earth so that we might ascend to God on it. This is the way you must take. If you depart from this way and try to speculate about the glory of the Divine Majesty—without this ladder—you will invent marvelous matters that transcend your horizon, but you will do so at very great harm to yourself.

Again in 1543, Luther preached a Christmas sermon in which he identified Christ as our brother: When one of several brothers becomes a great magnate, how happy the other brothers become! How gladdening they find this, as you see in Genesis when Joseph reveals himself to his brothers. And this is indeed a natural joy. But why is it, then, that we also are not joyful and our hearts are not touched and we do not praise and thank God upon hearing that our God became our flesh and blood and now sits above at the right hand of God as Lord over all creatures?

Among his many roles—theologian, reformer, professor, scholar, exegete, hymnodist, and prolific author—Martin Luther probably considered his role as preacher to be most important. Biographer Roland H. Bainton writes, "Luther is at his best and most characteristic in his sermons on the Nativity," and then excerpts one of them in which Luther unfolds the familiar story of Joseph and Mary traveling to Bethlehem: The inn was full. No one would release a room to this pregnant woman. She had to go to a cow stall and there bring forth the Maker of all creatures because nobody would give way. Shame on you, wretched Bethlehem! The inn ought to have been burned with brimstone, for

even though Mary had been a beggar maid or unwed, anybody at such a time would have been glad to give her a hand. There are many of you in this congregation who think to yourselves: "If only I had been there! How quick I would have been to help the baby! I would have washed his linen! How happy I would have been to go with the shepherds to see the Lord lying in the manger!" Yes you would! You say that because you know how great Christ is, but if you had been there at that time you would have done no better than the people of Bethlehem. Childish and silly thoughts are these! Why don't you do it now? You have Christ in your neighbor. You ought to serve Him, for what you do to your neighbor in need you do to the Lord Christ Himself.

Martin Luther loved Christmas. The joy he derived from the festival each year not only overflowed in his own composition of such familiar carols as "From Heaven Above to Earth I Come," but also recharged his spirit for the many struggles in his continually challenged life.

The first three excerpts above are translated from the German edition of Luther's works. The final excerpt is from Roland H. Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther* (Abingdon, 1950). You can buy individual volumes of Luther's Works (American Edition). Also check out Martin Luther's Christmas Book, edited by Roland H. Bainton (Augsburg Fortress, 1997), and What Luther Says by Ewald Plass (Concordia, 2006).

### **PERSONALLY SIGNIFICANT**

When the angels announced the birth of Jesus, they didn't tell royalty, the government, politicians, or the richest people in society. They appeared to shepherds watching their flocks near Bethlehem. Shepherds weren't esteemed in society. They weren't wealthy or important. They smelled like sheep, lived outside and slept on the ground. Most people didn't think much of them. But God chose to reveal His Son's arrival to them first.

"Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of a great joy that will be for all people."  
Luke 2:10 (King James)

The angels announced that the "good news" was for "all people." God's free gift of salvation given through Christ is available to "everyone" (Acts 2:21 NIV). The announcement to the shepherds fulfills prophecy and also demonstrates that, no matter how low, insignificant, cast aside or powerless you feel, God chooses you. There's no need to fear. Like a shepherd watching his sheep, He will keep you under His care and protect you.

By David Mastbrook

### **PRAYER REQUESTS**

- For Kathy Klueg's father, for the Lord's healing & strength
- For the Lord's healing for Dan Klueg's back, release of pain, peace, comfort & joy that he may be able to return to work.
- For the Lord's healing for Kathy Klueg's leg.
- For healing for Dick and Bev Brown.
- For the Lord's peace & comfort for Lori Sardiga and all her family as they deal with her mother's and her husband's parents deaths all in the last five months.
- For the Lord's safety & protection for all police officers and firefighters
- For the Lord's safety & protection for all men and women in our armed forces as they fight for our continued freedom and against aggression by those who would harm us.
- For the LLRA Board as they deal with the future of this ministry. Financial resources and new team members are greatly needed.



Scheduled Renewal Events

January 20, 2018	Holy Cross Lutheran Church Nazareth, PA	Spiritual Transformation Retreat
January 21, 2018	Holy Cross Lutheran Church Nazareth, PA	Sharing Your Faith Workshop

*A reminder that LLRA is a tax exempt 501 (c) 3 organization and depends on contributions from churches and individuals who have benefited from our ministry to help us continue to bring this ministry to more and more congregations all across America.*

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**Lutheran Lay Renewal of America**

**We post all of our upcoming events on our Facebook page at least a week in advance.**

Oh, God, our Father, thank You for Your mercies – innumerable, measureless, fathomless. Thank You! Be present with now us on each step of the LLRA journey. Grow us up in our inner being to receive & share abroad more & more of Your love. Let us be Your hands & face & words to all we meet. Set us free to serve You – free from anxiety, fear, self pity, self hatred, cynicism or skepticism. Free us from every crippling sin & any darkness of unbelief, Lord Jesus Christ, anoint our life & our spiritual community with deep faith & reckless abandonment to Your enduring goodness. Give us truly listening hearts, that we may hear Your Word & courageously act upon it, to the praise of Your Name & joy of Your heart. We ask this in the name of Your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Adapted from a prayer written by Brennan Manning in “The Ragamuffin Gospel”