

THE VOICE OF RENEWAL

The Newsletter of Lutheran Lay Renewal of America
Serving all Lutheran churches since 1971
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FROM THE PRESIDENT

As we walk through this Lenten season, our time of reflection of the sacrificial death and miraculous resurrection of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, is very daunting. As we journey with Christ, we find ourselves, eventually, at the foot of the cross, observing the loving and forgiving eyes of our Lord piercing our soul. No condemnation, only unconditional love.

Paul reminds us that God does love each of us unconditionally with no strings attached. He loves us for who we are, right in the immediate moment. That unconditional love is addressed when Paul writes to the Ephesians offering them the following prayer:

“And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the Lord’s holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge –that you may be filled to the measure of all fullness of God.” - Ephesians 3:17-19 NIV

In Lutheran Lay Renewal we look to the future with optimism and confidence that God has much in store for our ministry in 2018. Our Outreach Director, Bill Oehlschlager, who was voted to become the Executive Director, at our January LLRA Board meeting, has updates regarding LLRA’s future activities. Also, in this March Newsletter, you will have the uplifting and thought-provoking opportunity to read the article “Why do you go to Church?” by Dave Luecke, a LLRA Board member, and the “Surprise” article by our Vice President, Lori Sardiga.

As all of us continue our journey to the cross, we have the wonderful “surprise” of Easter Sunday waiting for us. May all of us embrace the tremendous love of Christ in our daily lives.

Elaine Schomaker
LLRA President

“I am thankful for small mercies. I compared notes with one of my friends who expects everything of the universe, and is disappointed when anything is less than the best, and I found that I begin at the other extreme, expecting nothing, and am always full of thanks for moderate goods.” - Ralph Waldo Emerson

SURPRISE!

Picture the scenario-an unsuspecting person arrives, when suddenly a whole room of people jump up from their hiding places and shout ‘**SURPRISE!**’ After the initial shock, one either reacts by being thrilled or wished they were somewhere else. As we get older, it seems many of us belong to the latter-we don’t like surprises-they aren’t always pleasant. Perhaps you’ve experienced some; an uncertain diagnosis, a padlocked door at your place of employment, a ‘Dear John’ letter left on the table or your darling teenage daughter announces she’s pregnant. **SURPRISE!** I recently experienced my own ‘surprise.’ My employer for the last 28 years announced his retirement plus the practice had already been sold! We, the staff, should have seen it coming yet we were still caught off guard. I now faced big changes. But I am not shaken. I believe this ‘surprise’ is a gift given by the Lord, so I am retiring.

Jesus too was full of surprises. The Bible calls them miracles or extraordinary events which astonished all who witnessed them. On Easter morning, the women were surprised when they found the stone rolled away from Jesus’ tomb. Two men in dazzling clothes appeared to them and said, “Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, he has risen! Remember how he told you, while he was still with you in Galilee: ‘The Son of Man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men, be crucified and on the third day be raised again’” (Lk. 24: 5-7). The women shouldn’t have been surprised; they should have expected the empty tomb. Immediately they ran to tell the disciples, “but they did not believe the women, because their words seemed to them like nonsense” (v. 11). Yet, Peter ran to the tomb, looked in and saw the linens lying there. **SURPRISE!** “The other disciple (*John*) who had reached the tomb first also went inside. He saw and believed” but “they did not understand the Scripture that Jesus had to rise from the dead” (Jn. 20:8-9). We see earlier in John 12:28-37 that Jesus asked for the Father to glorify His name. A thundering voice from Heaven said for all to hear, “I have glorified it and will glorify it again.” Further Jesus states that he would be lifted up to show the kind of death he would die (Jn. 12:32-33). Jesus also told them they would weep and mourn while the world rejoices but their grief would turn to joy (Jn. 16:20). Did they not remember? We know the disciples professed that Jesus knew all things and that he came from God (Jn. 16:30). But did they fully understand? Probably not. The disciples still needed the Spirit of truth to come and guide them into all truth (Jn. 16:13). Lastly, Jesus assured them, “In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world” (16:33). Jesus revealed himself, the disciples affirmed their faith in Him and became eyewitnesses to all Jesus had done. And yet amazingly, the empty tomb left them astonished.

However, the resurrection was no surprise; it was God’s plan to rescue a sinful world. The only surprise is that God loved and cared about us enough to sacrifice his one and only Son to take away our sins. We deserve condemnation but instead are extended grace and the gift of eternal life through the risen Christ. The question is, will you recognize and accept this gift?

Our lives are full of surprises. But we need not be surprised about our future. Christ is risen and so will we¹. Live assured that eternal life is guaranteed to those who believe² – **NO SURPRISE!**

Christ is Risen! He is Risen Indeed!
Lori Sardiga VP LLRA

¹ 5 *If we have been united with him like this in his death, we will certainly also be united with him in his resurrection. 6 For we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin. (Ro. 6:5-6)*

² 8 *“Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him...10 The death he died, he died to sin once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God (Ro. 6: 8,10). * All verses NIV*

NEW COLUMN

Pastor Dave Luecke, a member of our board of directors, is starting a new venture of writing a column a week rather than a book. It will be on a website named Growing Closer to God (www.GrowingCloserToGod.church), which should be up and running on April 1. He will draw especially on insights from the three books on the Holy Spirit he has published in recent years and we will be publishing one of these articles in each edition of our newsletter, starting on page four of this issue. In addition, those who are interested may visit the web site to read the weekly column and sign up to receive a free email every Wednesday morning, presenting a new article about the length of a Dear Abby column. Subscribers also can use Facebook to forward on to others the columns they find interesting. Dave hopes to quickly develop a master list of several thousand column subscribers.

Pastor Luecke is eager to see where this project goes. What motivates him is the recognition that the centuries-old treasures of our Protestant heritage will die out if we mainline churches do not connect better with younger generations. The truths are vital, but we need to fine tune our church cultures by which we express them. Pastor Luecke is a psychologist, former seminary professor (Fuller Seminary) and author of many books.

SOME THOUGHTS FOR THE MONTH

Forgiveness is the trait most strongly linked to happiness. “It’s the queen of all virtues and probably the hardest to come by.” – U. of Michigan psychologist Christopher Peterson

“You are now comfortably in the norm for self-centered American culture, right smack in the bland majority of people who find ancient religions dull but find themselves uniquely fascinating.” – Lillian Daniel on modern American culture

“To gather with God's people in united adoration of the Father is as necessary to the Christian life as prayer.” - Martin Luther

“I don’t know about you, but over the years some of my worst actions and decisions have been motivated by fear. Do you know what I mean? Fear has this way of leading you to misperceive both threats and opportunities, of prompting impulsive and sometimes irrational behavior, and of narrowing your vision so it’s difficult to see possibilities. Which is why it’s hard to be wise, prudent, or compassionate when you are afraid. Doubt, as it turns out, is not the opposite of faith; fear is, or at least that kind of fear that paralyzes, distorts, and drives to despair.” – David Lose

“The secularist philosophy embraces the notion of progress, by which this latest age is seen as the best of all that came before it. Moreover, it is all man's doing, with no need for any God or gods along the way. But progress on man's yardstick is illusory: what it really measures is our increasing alienation from God.” – Bishop N. T. Wright

“The final temptation, which will be the temptation of the church in the next 100 years, and we have the dim beginnings of it now; Satan says theology is politics. Why bother with theology, God, the transcendent, the mystery of redemption, the only thing that matters is politics. ... It was the third temptation of our blessed Lord not to be concerned with the divine but to be concerned only with the social and political order.” – Bishop Fulton Sheen

“Indeed it is wrong to speak of the Christian life: we should speak rather of Christ living in us.” – Dietrich Bonhoeffer

WHY DO YOU GO TO CHURCH?

Standing on the sidewalk outside a church after its worship, I asked a young professional-looking woman why she came to church that morning. Her answer was immediate, “I feel the power of God here.” She also explained that this church reached out to her when she was in juvenile detention.

If you were asked that question, how would you answer and how long would you need to think about it? I suspect many traditional Christians from historic church bodies would struggle, only to come up with some version of, “That’s what we do on Sunday mornings,” or “Here is where my friends are.”

When my family and I were members of a large Lutheran congregation that finished an impressive new sanctuary 40 years ago, I noticed that the average attendance reported in the weekly bulletin went down. Almost always a new sanctuary attracts more people. I asked the pastor why he thought fewer were attending. All he could come up with is, “I guess our people are losing the habit.” “Habit” is a very weak motivator for participating in anything.

Habit could sustain involvement in earlier times of slow change when children accepted the ways of their parents. Obviously, we are in a time now of fast social change driven by the increasingly rapid changes in the technology by which we organize our lives. Few of the youngest generation of adults aspire to carry on the habits of their parents because they have so many new options. The result is the almost complete absence of 20- and 30-somethings in the worship and activities of traditional congregations. The long-range implications should be obvious.

I hope to promote discussion among Christians who care about church life and value the heritage of traditional church bodies. By this I mean church bodies that value their centuries-long heritage. They used to be described as mainline: Episcopal, Lutheran, Presbyterian/Reformed, Methodist. They are all in decline and are best now described as old line.

I am a fifth-generation LCMS Lutheran with plenty of education (M. Div., M.B.A., Ph.D.) and lots of university experience teaching and doing research. I have been a practicing pastor now for almost thirty years, observing what works and what doesn’t. My books in recent years focused on Growing Closer to God, which is what happens when we learn how to let the Holy Spirit work his fruit in our lives.

I am convinced traditional churches need to fine-tune our culture through which we express our beliefs, and to do so in the direction of greater willingness to share our spiritual experiences. If you don’t have spiritual experiences in church, why bother going?

The outcome I seek is that those who participate in these discussions will learn better to **Name** your encounters with the Holy Spirit, to **Share** those stories with others, to **Seek** more such fulfilling experiences, and thereby to **Reach** more unchurched.

Bringing this about is the work of the Third Person of the Trinity, who is much neglected in traditional churches. To be drawn closer to God is to grow in the Holy Spirit, who is Christ’s Spirit.

I have worked these general concerns enough to know that I want to organize my contributions in the categories of Our Spiritual Brains, Motivational Psychology, Biblical Accounts, Church History Insights and whatever new topics emerge.

The young woman I mentioned who knew why she went to church was an African-American coming out of a Spirit-oriented, predominantly black congregation in the Tremont neighborhood of inner city Cleveland. Tremont has become a trendy place attracting young adults. It is also packed with church buildings from a former era. I intend to do more “why-do-you-go-to-church” research there, expecting the new generation to tell me why they don’t. Tremont is also where I grew up.

The Rev. Dave Luecke

RETREAT AND WORKSHOP IN NAZARETH, PA

On Saturday, January 20 Holy Cross Evangelical Lutheran Church in Nazareth, PA hosted our Spiritual Transformation retreat, followed by our Sharing Your Faith workshop on Sunday morning during the adult education time. Sarah Raley, the parishioner who organized the events, had this to say about the weekend:

"Your obedience to God's call on your life was powerfully evident and inspiring as you presented both workshops at Holy Cross. Thank you for providing wonderful material for all of us to discuss and continue to meditate on as we were both renewed, but I know personally were also called to greater levels of intimacy and as a result to obedient service to not just our Savior but also our Lord, Jesus Christ."

Pastor Brett Jenkins also wrote the following comments about the weekend:

"The team that led the spiritual transformation workshops at Holy Cross was first-class. They knew their material well, demonstrating not only an academic knowledge of the subject, but an experiential acquaintance with the spiritual life in the deep Christian tradition to buttress it. Their passion for Christ, Lutheran grounding in the dynamics of Law and Gospel, and familiarity with the tradition catholic gave their presentations (particularly the question and answer sessions) a profundity often lacking in the slickly produced offerings of ministries promoted by major publishing houses. I would highly recommend them as an integrated part of your congregation's catechetical and Christian formation ministries." - Rev. Brett Jenkins, STS Pastor, Holy Cross Evangelical Lutheran Church, Nazareth, PA

The retreat makes a good community outreach event and some of those who attended came from other churches in the area. A flyer with more information is available on our web site or call our office for more details.



SCHEDULED LUTHERAN LAY RENEWAL EVENTS

May 6, 2018

Sharing Your Faith Workshop
Holy Trinity Lutheran Church
The Rev. Sandy Towberman, Interim Pastor
Grove City, PA

More events are in the planning stages so check our web site often, where the calendar is always up to date.

Lutheran Lay Renewal of America wishes to acknowledge memorial donations given in 2017 in memory of:

Karen Schneider
Fred and Florence Pfeiffer

Our condolences go out to the families of these beloved saints. The memory of your loved ones will live on through the work of Christ. The board of directors of Lutheran Lay Renewal thank you for your generous gifts.

“Like” us on Facebook - Lutheran Lay Renewal of America

We post all of our upcoming events on our Facebook page, as well as a thought for the week every week.

PRAYER REQUESTS

- For Kathy Klueg’s father, for the Lord’s healing & strength
 - For the Lord’s healing for Dan and Kathie Klueg
 - For healing for Dick and Bev Brown.
 - For the Lord’s protection over all police officers and firefighters
 - For the Lord’s protection over all men and women in our armed forces
 - For wisdom and guidance for the LLRA Board of Directors, as we seek to grow and expand this ministry
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Lutheran Lay Renewal of America is eligible to receive Choice Dollars Grant Funds from the Thrivent Financial Choice Dollars program. We are grateful to Thrivent Financial, and those individuals who designate their Choice Dollars to us, for their support of LLRA and its ministry.

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.

Lutheran Lay Renewal of America
209 Thornwood Drive
Butler, PA 16001
724-287-5151
LLRAJ316@gmail.com
www.lutheranrenewal.com