

TABLE TALK

Official Publication of the LMS-USA
...these words... shall be upon your heart; you shall teach them... and talk of them... Deut. 6:6,7



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Editor's Note -

In the last issue, actually in the last two issues of Table Talk, mention was made of the early church gatherings, and of small church gatherings yet today. This issue touches on some small church gatherings today that have affiliation with our church body, the LMS-USA. It seems as if most larger church bodies have little interest in any continuing affiliation with a church having only a handful of members that continues on with little or no expectation of growth. In some cases these groups have a long history with faithful participation with a church body, but because of dwindling rural population, or changes in community demographics, the numbers diminish, and in turn any real financial support of the programs of the synod is no longer possible.

And there is this also, that of faithfulness to the Word. In some cases the larger church has, in the truest sense of the word, left the Word behind and embraced teachings and practices in opposition to Scripture, and in not so few cases, in opposition also to the positions stated in their own constitutions. So... a small group breaks off and is pretty much left to its own.

Further... we are living in a time when it is often difficult for believers - especially for those who hold to a high view of Scripture, and value the historic liturgy and hymnody... and as in our case, the place of the Lutheran Confessions in all of this - to find a church home when making a move to a new community. For such, does not the start of a small group make sense?



What can be done? Is there some way that these small groups might be encouraged in what they are about ...that they can be given support in what they are doing... that pastors involved in these small groups can find fellowship ... that lay leaders in these groups can be organized... be given learning opportunities and leadership skills... be given help in preaching and teaching skills... and maybe licensed by an umbrella organization?

And this lifts up a further question. Might this be a role that could, especially among those small groups who embrace Lutheranism, be taken on by the LMS?

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Worship In The Small Church

by Rev. Ralph Spears

*For where two or three are gathered in my name,
there am I among (in the midst of) of them.*

Matthew 18:20

Jesus has just defined the Church as no more than 'two or three' - as the Ecclesia... the Gathering. The Church - for discipline... for agreement... for action. But for the sake of worship wouldn't ten or twelve sound better, or twenty or thirty better still?

In the Church of the 21st Century, two or three hundred is much more like it. Who would aim at 'two or three'?

When I first came to my last call one old gentleman in his 90's, when the worship service was over, would hurry to the back of the church where the official attendance was recorded and invariably say, "Only a hundred fifty? Why I can remember back when there were two hundred!" We were building from a very low period, comparatively for that urban congregation, when a Church that could easily seat three hundred fifty had dipped to seventy-five just the year before.

So was the Lord serious about that definition by number for His Church even in Chapter 18 of Matthew? It was no problem for Him to draw a large crowd during that time of His earthly ministry, in fact it was almost a problem that He did. There were the crowds that assembled on the shore of the Galilee Sea such that He had to push off and teach from a boat! Then there was the feeding of 5,000 and later 4,000, (just counting the men) on at least two occasions following His teachings. At times the sensational teacher could scarcely move about due to the crowds. But in definition of The Church, the strength lay not in numbers but as a functioning unit within

much smaller numbers. Interestingly, the modern church is tied to numbers - the bigger the better. But surely when He told Peter, James, John and Andrew that they would be 'fishers of men', Jesus was not suggesting that the limit of their catch was just two or three.

But aren't we talking about two different things? ...two entirely different things? The first is the Lord's definition of a functioning model. The second is the matter of a sum (the attendance... the number of people there... many skeptical, just listening).

The important dynamic is that those assembled should think, pray and function "In His Name," which means in *His Way and in His manner, because then... Christ is among them, in their midst, creating the miracle*. Thus we begin the worship or prayer how? By invoking Him in the Name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Now we are greater than ourselves. We are "In Christ"!

We do this with great care realizing with humility that something out of the realm of the ordinary in taking place.

We need only look at the earnest teachings of three chapters of John's Gospel to appreciate the dynamic of God in Christ with us (see chapters 14, 15, and 16). And while there, note also the prayer - His Prayer for the Church in Chapter 17. I once heard someone say, "Get lost in those four chapters and you will never be lost."

All of this outlines the most subtle and prevalent heresy about the Church. What would that be? That

the Church *building* is the Church. And a second, as we have outlined here, that the larger numbers that attend a congregation makes that congregation more valid and important.

The heresy is that we use the name of the church building for the congregation of people

Then there was that old heresy that Luther dealt with in his day - that a Church site is infinitely more important if it has dead Saint's bones buried beneath the altar. As though they still lived there. Saint Peter's basilica in Rome being the most prevalent example today.

We are not just on a mission of heresy hunting here, however these misguided ideas do influence the proper and important concept of The Church.

A few years ago as I went to turn

on the furnace at our church building in the Saturday night darkness - I stepped down into five inches of water that should have been residing in the heating circulating system. A quick call to the congregation announced that we would be having worship in our living room next morning. The dynamic there was quite different with no organ or stained glass windows. Some of our number mentioned that they had never "had church" in any other place than a church building before. Some even liked it better. Everything was closer, more personal - even if that meant having to sing by piano or unaccompanied. Soon however in the months of repair, some began to ask when we would return to the Church. To them the church was the St. Matthew building, and several felt cheated from the usual setting that meant CHURCH to them.

St. Matthew Apostle Lutheran Church

After retirement, a little over two years ago now, rather than looking for another congregation in the area, we began to hold worship in our home with some others - four to five usually, with a total of seven one morning.

This has been a learning experience. For one thing, I have learned that operating a home congregation church is almost as difficult as a church functioning from a church building, except of course, the building upkeep is no longer a factor. On the other hand, and granted this is difficult to try to explain to someone else, I have found that honoring and maintaining a respect for the vibes of the home area where worship takes place is important.

I can think back to my very first worship service. I was seventeen. It was in a converted night club with a juke box behind the altar and the smell of stale beer. I was especially

cognizant of the need for a kind of 'sanctifying of that area' by attitude before and during the service.

After that experience, and in all of the "churches" during my ministry, I was especially aware of that, but especially so in my second congregation in New Jersey where I found myself in a struggle to maintain the worship "feeling" for the first few weeks or months, doing my



Some worshipers along with pastor Spears at a recent worship service

part to maintain the area for the Holy Spirit to function. I am sure some would not understand all this, but I think for me, it has to do with Jesus not being able to do miracles because of the people's unbelief. I really do believe this to be important and often overlooked.

But our home church has been a rich experience. Each person becomes more involved, more a participant. With five or so, there is no hiding behind anyone else. It is more of a personal situation. We sing a hymn or two, we chant the liturgy (the SBH hymnal of 1958), and the sermon often ends in a warm discus-

sion of the topics that have been presented for the day, and it involves everyone.

Each person has a part in the liturgy: leading the singing of the responses, leading the Psalm for the day and the reading of the Epistle. If there is someone new, we ask them to read the Old Testament Lesson. All this has worked quite nicely for two years and four months with only a couple of breaks for bad weather or illness. The traditional service is all there and concludes with the Prayer of the Church, the Lord's Prayer and the Benediction.

Our Savior Lutheran Church

One of our affiliated congregations, Our Savior Lutheran Church, Memphis TN, began as a LCA mission start up over sixty years ago. About two years after their start, they built a building which has been thoroughly adequate on a major highway south of the city. The church has the distinction of being located on S. Elvis Presley Blvd., not that far from Graceland, and less than half a mile from the Mississippi border.

To begin with, the Mission developer provided excellent leadership for the start-up congregation, but less so with succeeding pastors. In time, the congregation became depleted of adequate funds to maintain an attractive salary and upkeep of the facility. However, through thick and thin, the congregation has survived when any other group in like circumstances would have folded. After the ELCA was formed, it provided little, if any, helpful leadership. At one point a local African-American group used the building until they ceased regular functioning.



Our Savior Lutheran Church, Memphis, TN

Shortly after the formation of the LMS, a son of the congregation whose parents were founders of Our Savior's began to lead the services and preach the sermons. With help and guidance from the LMS synod office, this fellow was eventually licensed as a lay pastor. A nearby Missouri Lutheran Pastor, until his church was closed down, was able to come once a month and officiate at Communion, baptisms, and funerals. When that pastoral help was no longer available, the lay pastor, having received further instruction, began to administer communion. An added blessing has been the assistance they have received from an organist/choir director who has served them now for close to 30 years. This fellow has done this for some travel money and little else!

It is not just a bare bones ministry. The congregation has been able to maintain a fund to be of help to travelers and others in need to an admirable degree over the years when, at the same time, they have struggled to pay their own bills. All this has been, and presently is, accomplished with only eight to ten regular members and with a weekly attendance of little more than that. Here, as is so often the case, the many children of the congregation have moved on.

When the history of Our Savior Lutheran is finally written, it will prove a worthy tale of service survival.



Worship service at Our Savior Lutheran with Pastor Michael Amsden preaching

St. Luke the Evangelist: A Confessional Lutheran House Church?

by Rev. Jon Holst

The churches of Asia send you greetings. Aquila and Prisca, together with the church in their house, send you hearty greetings in the Lord. (1 Cor 16:19)

THE DESERT

Riverside is the twelfth-largest city in California. It has an area of over 81 sq. mi. and a population of well over 300,000 people. In that city, there are seven Lutheran congregations representing three different Lutheran Church bodies (ELCA, LC-MS, WELS). Of those seven congregations, three reject the divine inspiration and authority of Holy Scripture and hold a quatenus view of the Lutheran Confessions. The remaining four, while confessing that the Bible is the inspired and inerrant Word of God, have become increasingly focused on entertainment-driven worship that diminishes the objective nature of the Word and Sacraments and seeks to grow their congregations through emotional experiences and importation of secular culture. For example, in one of these

congregations, children as old as 6th grade do not remain for the 'service.' but are "dismissed for an interactive Sunday School experience," after a few songs by the praise band. Indeed, in my own time there, I once expressed that I missed singing the *Kyrie* and was told that they don't do that because it's too Catholic.

In six of these congregations, there is also complete laxity with respect to admission to the Sacrament of the Altar (at least such was the case when this author last visited these congregations). Those who deny the *unio sacramentalis*, those who are not baptized, those who have never made a Christian confession of faith in their life can come forward to receive Communion without anyone having the slightest conversation with them. This, of course,

is troublesome to the confessional Lutheran who knows that "anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself" (1 Cor. 11:29) and who holds a *quia* subscription to the statement: "The custom has been retained among us of not administering the sacrament to those who have not previously been examined and absolved" (AC XXV). Such laxity in pastoral care is certainly not in keeping with faithful stewardship of the Mysteries (1 Cor. 4:1).

THE OASIS

For some time, there was a little Lutheran congregation (LC-MS) in the neighboring county of San Bernardino that was faithful to Scripture and the Confessions and just wanted to be Lutheran in doctrine and practice. This congregation became the church home for several Lutherans from various synodical backgrounds and for a few of non-denominational background who realized they were in need of meat instead of milk (1 Cor. 3:2). Members travelled the Southern California freeways from as far as 50 miles in order to gather around God's gifts of Word and Sacrament with other Lutherans who just wanted to be Lutheran: confessing their sins, singing the hymns and liturgies that have been the *viva vox evangelii* throughout the ages, hearing Law/Gospel preaching, receiving the Lord's Supper faithfully administered, being strengthened to go out and live a Christian life in the context of their various vocations, and serving each other and their community. This congregation was the spiritual home for my family for fifteen years.

The congregation was never well off financially. In fact, when they called their pastor shortly before my family's arrival, they told him that they might have enough money to pay him for two years. We struggled along: tight budgets, pastor-re-

quested cuts to his own salary, many giving a little more than their personal budgets probably allowed, bake sales, grocery store script, whatever we could do. We reroofed, retiled, repainted and a host of other necessities all with volunteer labor: 70 and 80 year-old men up on a roof swinging hammers! But for all our labors of love, this congregation closed its doors in the Spring of 2013. Older members had entered their eternal rest or moved closer to their Mid-Western families. Younger families were feeling the strain of living in an area where the cost of living is almost 70% higher than the national average. And the area around our little congregation was nearly 70% Hispanic who tend to be Roman Catholic or Pentecostal in their church affiliation.

MORE DESERT WANDERING

When our Lutheran oasis closed, some older members became shut-ins since they were not able to travel. Others made the trip further into San Bernardino County to the next best congregation. Some settled for one of the entertainment-driven LC-MS congregations. One returned to the local non-denomination megachurch. And others travelled to Los Angeles County for a time in hopes of finding a new church home.

Five of us simply could not find a place to call home. Throughout this difficult time, I had maintained my close friendship with a faithful LC-MS pastor (who has remained my confessor to this day) 120 miles away from us. We sought his advice and spent time discussing our struggle with him. The result of those discussions was that four of the remaining members of our Lutheran oasis asked if we could start a new Lutheran congregation and if I would be willing to pursue pastoral formation so that they could issue me a Call wherein I would serve bivocationally: maintaining my secular

vocation as a public school teacher.

We had long followed the work of the International Lutheran Council and were greatly pleased and encouraged by what we perceived to be growing cooperation between global confessional Lutheran church bodies for proclamation of the Gospel and the up-building of Christ's kingdom in accord with our confession of faith and practice. Looking at the member church bodies, we encountered for the first time, the *Lutheran Ministerium and Synod*. I contacted the *Lutheran Ministerium and Synod* and ultimately a plan for my pastoral formation was born.

ST. LUKE THE EVANGELIST LUTHERAN CHURCH

During the years from 2015-2017, St. Luke the Evangelist Lutheran Church started to take shape. I enrolled in an MDiv program, we began meeting regularly in my home on Sundays for Matins where I would read sermons written by other faithful Lutheran pastors, we wrote a constitution and by-laws, we incorporated as a non-profit, we set up a website, and we started inviting people to church! In the Spring of 2017, I completed my MDiv. In June of 2017, I met with the ministerium

for colloquy, received a Call from St. Luke the Evangelist, and was ordained and installed as St. Luke's first pastor on July 23, 2017.

Since then, after much prayerful consideration, we decided to move St. Luke's to neighboring Jurupa Valley, CA since it is a town of 110,000 people and had no Lutheran presence (it previously had an ELCA congregation, however, it has since closed). My wife and I sold our house in Riverside and purchased a new house in Jurupa Valley that would accommodate a permanent worship space for us to gather in. We have been receiving God's gifts of Word and Sacrament in this new space since June 2018 and currently have an average attendance of 10. We have one family of 3, one family of 4, a single man who is our treasurer and webmaster, one adult catechumen, and one LC-MS pastor who does not currently have a Call and prefers to worship with us rather than the neighboring LC-MS congregations who have been overrun by entertainment-driven worship styles.

A CONFESSIONAL LUTHERAN HOUSE CHURCH?

When we first considered the idea of beginning St. Luke's in a home, there was much discussion and not a little reservation. After all, Lutherans have had a presence in America for centuries. Gone, we thought, were the days of my great-grandparents who hosted a small Lutheran congregation in the basement of their Minnesota home while waiting for the Church of Norway to send them a pastor. We took stock of the situation. The truth is that Christianity is under great assault by the culture of the day and people are leaving the Church in droves if they were ever in the Church to begin with. The struggle of our Luth-



eran oasis was not unique but is something that small, faithful congregations are facing at an ever-increasing rate. We considered the house churches of China, the early Christians who gathered in secret to avoid Roman persecution, the house church of Dura-Europos, and an article about an Eastern Orthodox church in England that meets in a private home. We came to the conclusion that, even though we have enjoyed much freedom and prosperity as Lutherans in America, that has not always been the case for faithful Christians who have had to adapt to many different circumstances over the centuries. For faithful Lutherans in some places, that adaptability is likely to be a necessity.

It was our desire to see that any such congregation having its beginnings in a house would be in accord with Scripture and the Confessions: at least two or three gathered in Christ's name for the reception of Christ's gifts of Word and Sacrament and shepherded by a man who was called and ordained to serve in the pastoral office established by Christ; and to do so in such a way that we were not sectarian but actively pursuing "the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Eph. 4:3).

Except for the place that we gather, there is really nothing at St. Luke's that would be unusual or unfamiliar to a traditional Lutheran. We have a sign out front. We celebrate the Divine Service every Sunday using the historic hymns and liturgy that we have received (although sung acapella). We give

tithes and offerings and support other Lutheran ministries in America and abroad. We have an altar, baptismal font, lectern, paraments, vestments, candles, and Christian art in the space that we have set aside for worship. There is robust singing and Christ-centered, Law/Gospel preaching. There is Sunday school and an adult Bible study, pastor's reading group Monday nights and adult catechesis on Tuesdays. We have midweek Vespers during Advent and Lent and on other occasions, and even gather for the Sacred Triduum of Maundy Thursday - Good Friday - and the Great Vigil of Easter. We eat together, bear each other's burdens, and reach out to those in our community who are willing to have a conversation and are in desperate need of Christ's mercy and forgiveness (indeed, as of this writing, I am just beginning a conversation with a nominal Roman Catholic and an agnostic who wants to sit down and ask some questions!).

We do not know what the future will bring for St. Luke's - for that is entirely in God's hands - but whether we remain as a house church or grow into a congregation of hundreds with our own building, we will strive to remain faithful to Scripture and the Confessions in all that we teach and practice while engaging in works of mercy in the context of our various vocations so that St. Luke's might be an oasis for others where they too may drink of Christ the Living Water and never thirst again (Jn 4:13-14).



The house church's pulpit, altar, and baptismal font

A Ministry Worth Giving Some Attention To

As many of you likely know, it is difficult to find a good, Bible based worship opportunity when unable to attend one's own church. And even ones own church, as has been suggested, can sometimes present problems. There is a ministry however, that provides an answer. Granted, television or a computer cannot take the place of worship in fellowship with a worshipping community, but in some situations we do what is next best.



This Lutheran Missouri Synod program is produced in various districts, and features pastors from those districts leading an abbreviated worship service with the confession, absolution, scripture lessons, hymns, creed, and sermon. These programs are specifically designed for the hospital, nursing home, at home individuals, and the homebound. The Main Street Choir provides the music. The Sioux Falls choir, for example, is composed of area musicians from many area churches. Presently there are over 60 singers that come together to record the hymns.

The services follow the church calendar and are not delayed broadcasts. Past services are archived, and the recorded hymns are also listed and available online and could easily be used in conjunction with a home church worship service.

The services are broadcast Sunday mornings at 9:30 a.m. Likely most all of the readers of this newsletter will be unable to receive this programming in their homes on their television sets (see listing on the website), however, the program is available online anywhere in the world at mainstreetliving.com.

When you go to <http://www.mainstreetliving.com> you will find several listening areas (Sioux Falls, Lincoln, Twin Cities, etc.). Click on the area you want, then scroll down and click on watch.

Immanuel Lutheran Church Rice Lake, WI

by Rev. John Erickson

There is no definite record as to exactly when Immanuel Lutheran Church had its beginning. But it was sometime between 1895 and 1901 that a group of German Lutherans met and determined to form a worshipping community. In 1904 it was decided that they should build a church, but shortage of funds held off actual construction until 1913.

Dedication of the church took place in February of 1915. Up to that point services had been held in a home that had a somewhat large parlor and an organ. In those early years the congregation was affiliated with the Iowa Synod - that Synod merged to form the ALC (1930-1960). Services continued in German until into the 1930s.



Immanuel Lutheran 1913

There are no records from the years 1938-1940 and it appears the church was closed for a time. In 1943 a vote was taken to sever ties with the ALC. That same year Immanuel began to share a pastor with First Lutheran of Rice Lake. In 1955 the subject of joining the Missouri Synod was broached. They did not join but continued to be served by Missouri Synod pastors. At some point in the later 80's the church did affiliate with the Missouri Synod.

It was in the later 80's that things began to change. The farming population was diminishing, young people were moving away, older people retired to the city, and of



Immanuel Lutheran 1988

course there were deaths. The result was diminishing worship attendance along with contributions. For a few years Immanuel had their own full time pastor. But in 1993 they called a pastor to serve half time. When he retired (1999) they again began to be served by pastors who took on ministry at Immanuel along with their other full time ministry. To make things easier, they held services on Sunday afternoon, and then later, late Saturday afternoon.

In the spring of 2015, the active membership was down to 15 members and the average attendance was also 15. The Missouri Synod pastors in the area were more than busy with their own calls and did not appear they would find any pastoral assistance; and there was no encouragement from the district office.

It was then that they contacted me. I, as a pastor of the LMS, had served a neighboring LCMS congregation for seven years. I had done so with the blessing of the pastors of the circuit as well as that of the LCMS district president. That congregation had been unable to support a pastor on their own and making it a two point parish seemed out of the question.

I had some health issues that necessitated my retirement in 2011. By 2015, when approached with re-

gard to a call to Immanuel, those issues had been resolved. Therefore when contacted by Immanuel Lutheran, it appeared the Holy Spirit had arranged for a good fit.

In that the congregation could now move once again to a Sunday worship hour, we have kept the Saturday worship hour. We also hold our

Thanksgiving, Advent, Christmas Eve, and Lenten and Holy Week services at the same 5:30 p.m. worship hour. We meet for Bible Study an hour before our Saturday worship hour.

An issue facing so many churches today, at least those churches that follow a traditional worship format, is finding an available organist. This is one very important reason why we have not moved back to Sunday worship. Even though they are involved with other churches, we actually have three excellent organists that we can call on and who are willing to help us out... plus one additional former music teacher/pianist who 'loves' to help us out with our special Christmas and Easter services when needed.

One thing that has proved interesting in all of this, is that the LCMS district has refused to install me as pastor. As already mentioned, 15 years ago I was installed as a pastor in another LCMS with the blessing of the district office. However, now more lately at Immanuel, they refuse to do so. But the congregation refuses to get hung up in the politics of the issue, and considers the call they extended to me to be legitimate.

Another matter regards membership. Being that I am an officer in the LMS-USA, I am not able to hold dual membership with another synod. Further, there are some situa-



Immanuel's altar and other furnishings were harvested from the land of one of the perishoners.

tions with, and practices of, the LCMS that give reason why the LMS as a synod and I as a pastor, have not pursued altar and pulpit fellowship with Missouri.

In that there is no longer an LMS congregation in our area, but in order that my wife and I might have fellowship as members of

a Lutheran congregation, Immanuel has designed and made available an Associate Membership, whereby an individual might have involvement in the life of the congregation, without, if one can put it this way, giving allegiance to the LCMS. At present, nine members of Immanuel are Associate members.

As mentioned, the membership that was at 15 four and a half years ago, after funerals and folks leaving, and others joining is now at 18, and the average worship attendance is also at 18. Further, while for the first several years we were struggling, even going a little backwards financially, we are a present doing very well financially. The congregation is giving support to LCMS as well as to several other ministries. It has truly been a blessing to witness how God is able to provide.

Immanuel is proof that a small handful of persons, who remain in a church after that church's over a hundred years of ministry, can still be a viable church family.

There needs to be something done to help these small groups. Within a few miles of Immanuel there are at least four other congregations in similar situations. Might there not be a way, for example, to tie, even up to a half dozen of such groups into a parish? Might we not do more to encourage 'tent making' ministries... or....?

Table Talk
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The LMS-USA is Lutheran Church body describing itself as *Biblical, Confessional, Evangelical, Liturgical and Congregational*. It is a Forum in which there is an on going discussion of theological issues and concerns among clergy and lay alike. The LMS-USA meets annually for a Theological Conference and this publication, besides carrying news of the Ministerium and Synod, functions also as a vehicle for this continuing dialogue.

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