

RESPONDING TO HURRICANE DORIAN IN THE BAHAMAS

Hurricane Dorian hit the Atlantic as a Category 5 storm in early September. Disaster response and engineering teams from Water Mission are now on the ground responding to the urgent need for clean, safe water in the Bahamas.

“Water Mission is working with partners and local municipalities to mobilize a safe water system as quickly as possible. Given the lack of freshwater sources, reverse osmosis is the only guaranteed option to provide access to safe water,” said George C. Greene IV, president of Water Mission.

Initial assessments revealed that the main sources of drinking water in the hardest hit areas came from rainwater collection systems in individual homes and a municipal system supplied by a deep well on the mainland. In both cases, saltwater contamination has taken place. The 20-foot surge, combined with sustained 185 mph winds, has resulted in complete destruction of any stored-water supplies, as well as significant saltwater intrusion in the aquifer.



Hurricane Dorian left catastrophic damage in the Bahamas.

Utilizing reverse osmosis, a specialized water purification process where contaminants and salt from saltwater are filtered out and flushed away, Water Mission’s team can provide water that is clean and safe for survivors to drink. They have been able to provide as much as 30,000 gallons a day.

Water Mission is sending shipments of water treatment solutions, generators and other supplies via boat and plane to some of the hardest hit areas, including Marsh Harbor, Elbow Cay and Green Turtle Cay.

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Water Mission is working with corporate partners in the United States and non-governmental organization (NGO) partners in the Bahamas to provide emergency solutions as quickly as possible.

Hurricane Dorian, one of the strongest, longest-lasting storms on record in the Atlantic, made a direct hit on the Abacos, flattening entire neighborhoods and turning airports into lakes. News media have reported that more than 70,000 people are homeless after the storm. About 50 deaths have been reported, a number that is expected to climb as people remain missing or buried under rubble.

“Our hearts are breaking as we begin to see the level of devastation and destruction,” Greene said.

Water Mission, along with the Bahamian government and other first responders, must overcome a number of unique challenges. A lengthy and complex road ahead is anticipated, and Water Mission officials believe that full cooperation



between local municipalities and international NGOs is the best way to assist the Bahamian islands into recovery.

“No government or organization can take this on alone — it’s just too big,” said Craig Williams, Water Mission’s disaster response coordinator.

With the northern islands of the Bahamas leveled by Hurricane Dorian, getting to people who are in danger and responding to their needs bring about immense logistical challenges. With some airports inoperable and road blockages prohibiting traffic, traveling to and around the Bahamas currently requires calculated tactics and strong partnerships. We ask that our friends continue to pray for those affected, for our disaster responders’ travels and logistics, and for collaborators to come alongside us in this effort.

Clean, safe water is a desperately needed resource in the Bahamas right now. Matching grants of more than \$1 million have been pledged to encourage others to support Water Mission’s relief efforts.

With the support of our friends and partners, we can confidently address such a colossal need. We want to save lives in the Bahamas and do all that we can to help our Bahamian brothers and sisters rebuild.

Our team is incredibly grateful for your generous partnership. As you lift survivors and our team in prayer, offer financial support, and spread the word

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to your friends and family, know that you're helping to bring hope to survivors in the midst of this heartbreaking tragedy.

A few weeks after a disaster hits, the focus shifts toward reconstruction. Following Hurricane Dorian, the people of the Bahamas have found their homes damaged or leveled to the ground. Houses are now ghostly shells of debris.

"We have nothing left so ... we just have to see what [lies ahead]," said Romain, a father of four. He hid his children under a bathroom sink to protect them during the Category 5 storm.



Hurricane Dorian tore apart Romain's house. The flooding that the storm caused also led to saltwater contamination of water sources.

Each reverse osmosis system can produce enough safe water for thousands of people daily. The systems will remain in place for as long as necessary, will be optimized and reconfigured as needs change, and will serve survivors to and through reconstruction.

Historically, Water Mission has responded to both emergent and long-term needs that result from a disaster situation. In the Bahamas, as in previous disaster response initiatives, the goal is not only to offer immediate access to safe water; they also assist local leaders and communities in rebuilding, and aim to equip them for the lengthy and complex work of reconstruction.

This month marks two years since Hurricane Maria struck Puerto Rico. In 2017, Water Mission's disaster response teams moved quickly to assess the situation in Puerto Rico and develop an appropriate plan for providing safe water to the island.

Puerto Rico had a unique problem: hundreds of rural communities had functional water systems in place, but they were inoperable because the power had been knocked out. Water Mission's team focused on reconnecting existing water systems to reliable power sources. For many communities, the answer was solar power.



Water Mission staff evaluate a reverse osmosis machine in the Bahamas.

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Weather-related power outages still occur throughout the island. Because of this, we have installed independent solar micro-grids that can support safe water production when the island loses power. And Water Mission is about to install a Kohler power-blending unit, which switches between solar and grid power when necessary — ensuring that water is flowing continually, day and night.

In some parts of Puerto Rico, Water Mission is finishing work in schools that will serve as community shelters for future emergencies. According to Matt Conger, Water Mission's project manager in Puerto Rico, "We have modified the plumbing, added extra faucets in the schools' kitchens and assembled kits with two water tanks. The tanks will be filled by the fire department prior to a hurricane and should provide water for a week."

Water Mission has worked with the American Red Cross, Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Lincoln Lab and government entities to ensure the success of these projects in Puerto Rico. Cooperating with the local government in Puerto Rico, as well as other NGOs, is the most strategic and efficient way to help in such a situation. We maintain this perspective in the Bahamas.

While access to safe water is an important and immediate need, it is not the only one. World Central Kitchen is serving food to both Bahamians and responders, and Heart to Heart International is providing medical care. These are just two of the other organizations on the ground in the Bahamas, and Water Mission is providing them with safe water so that they can operate and bring much-needed relief.

The road to recovery is long, both in the Bahamas and in Puerto Rico. Working with local municipalities, other NGOs, local leaders, community members and corporate partners ensures that Water Mission's responses to Hurricane Dorian and Hurricane Maria are efficient and viable now and in the future.

We know that our brothers and sisters in the Caribbean wish to have their homes and nations restored. As Romain said, "We want everybody to

come back to living [in] our place, on our island. Please come back. That's what we need."

Water Mission is an NALC Recognized Ministry. To partner with them or learn more about their work, please visit watermission.org.

NALC DISASTER RESPONSE UPDATE

NALC Disaster Response has communicated with our pastors and congregations on the East Coast — from Jacksonville, Florida, to Atlantic City, New Jersey.

Hurricane Dorian touched the coast in the Carolinas, causing localized flooding and tidal surge. However, other than power outages, there are no severe damage reports. Our congregations are reaching out to the larger communities in each state to offer aid and assistance.

A load of flood buckets from the Disaster Warehouse at Advent Lutheran Church in Kings Mountain, North Carolina, was delivered to Advent Lutheran Church in North Charleston, South Carolina.

If you would like to make a monetary donation, please send your contribution to NALC Disaster Response, 2299 Palmer Dr., Suite 220, New Brighton, MN 55112.

If you would like to donate emergency relief supplies and gift cards for long-term recovery efforts, please send them to Mary Bates, NALC Disaster Warehouse, 810 Main St., Caldwell, OH 43724 or contact Mary about other arrangements at disasterresponse@thenalc.org.

To provide assistance in the Bahamas, which was devastated by Hurricane Dorian, please send your support to Water Mission. For information on their response go to watermission.org.

Thank you for your prayers and support!

NALS FORMS PARTNERSHIP WITH CONCORDIA LUTHERAN SEMINARY IN EDMONTON

The Rev. Dr. Maurice Lee

North American Lutheran Seminary

The North American Lutheran Seminary (NALS) is pleased to announce a partnership with Concordia Lutheran Seminary (CLS) in Edmonton, Alberta, which will make it a little less complicated for Canadian NALC students to get quality, residentially based, rigorous and ecumenical Lutheran training for Christ-centered work and ministry.

Canadian congregations have provided significant theological and pastoral leadership to the North American Lutheran Church. This includes sending and supporting seminary students being educated for ministry in the church. For such students, especially those with families, relocating across an international border to be at the North American Lutheran Seminary campus in Ambridge, Pennsylvania, can involve considerable logistical and financial challenges.

Concordia Lutheran Seminary, while independently governed, has a close relationship with the Lutheran Church—Canada, the analogue in Canada of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod in the United States. Under the leadership of its president, the Rev. Dr. James Gimbel, three full-time faculty members, and many other part-time faculty, CLS offers a rounded, formative theological education in the confessional Lutheran tradition. We are excited that they have officially agreed to invite NALC candidates to join them in this venture.

Discussions toward cooperation between the NALC and CLS date back to 2012, with the Rev. Phillip Gagnon, the Rev. Karl Johnsen and the Rev. Dr. Glenn Johnson of the NALC's Canadian Mission District working with CLS to produce an early draft agreement.

In the spring of 2018, the NALS Board of Regents resolved to renew attempts to identify the equivalent of an extension center for the NALS in Canada. This work continued in the fall, when the Rev. Dr. Amy Schiffrin, NALS president, and the Rev. Dr. Maurice Lee, interim director of partnerships and recruitment, visited Edmonton to meet with the Rev. Dr. James Gimbel, CLS president, and faculty members the Rev. Dr. Stephen Chambers, Dr. Jennifer Frim, and the Rev. Dr. John Hellwege. The result of this meeting, with further consultation in the first part of 2019, was an M.Div. Articulation Agreement Between Concordia Lutheran Seminary and the North American Lutheran Seminary, signed in September.

Under the terms of the agreement, NALC candidates — women and men — may enroll as students at CLS in Edmonton, taking the full curriculum of academic course work offered by CLS toward the Master of Divinity degree, with a small number of recommended substitutions through the NALS. Candidacy and internship arrangements for such students will be supervised by the NALC's Candidacy Committee, in conversation with CLS faculty. The result will be candidates with an M.Div. and spiritual formation from an excellent accredited Lutheran seminary, who will also have had to deal with less of the upheaval and complexity associated with moving to a different country.

We are delighted and grateful, not only that this new opportunity has opened up for NALC pastors and church workers to be trained in a grounded, hospitable environment, but also that the NALS has served to bring us into an authentic partnership with fellow North American Lutherans as we bear witness in our time to the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

CHOOSE TO WALK THE ROAD OF LIFE WITH JESUS

The following devotion first appeared in "Harvest News," the official newsletter of U.S. Custom Harvesters, Inc., and is used by permission. Pastor Cathi Braasch has written a devotional column for the newsletter for nearly six years.

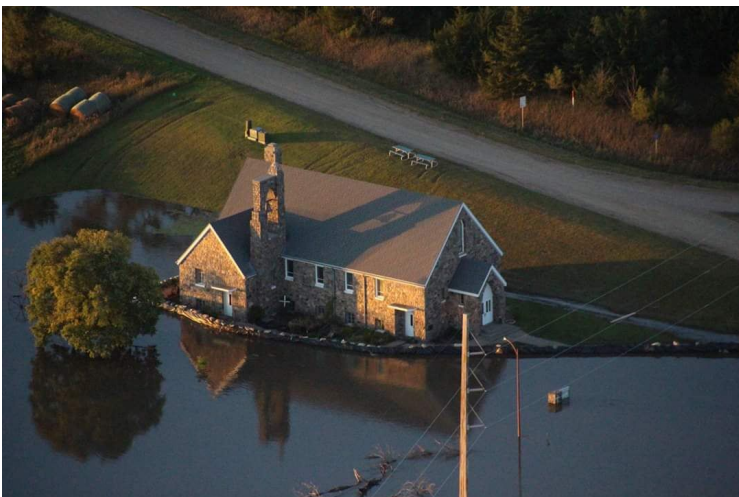
It's Sunday afternoon, Sept. 15, 2019. Deadline day for this monthly devotion. A day that, in any normal season, would be a hoped-for sabbath break from the previous six days of work tending God's creation. Folks along so much of the harvest road know, though, that this is no normal season. As I write, another river is flooding. Again. Attention turns, as it must, to emergency measures, as the hopes and hard work of so many are at risk of widespread damage and destruction. Measures like moving what can be moved out of harm's way. Measures like constructing a second dike in case the first one fails to protect the home place and all the hopes and dreams it holds. Measures like evacuating the dreamers themselves, those whose hard work and that of generations before them could soon be washed away.



Flood waters surround Our Savior's Lutheran Church, an NALC congregation near Menno, South Dakota.

These days, my focus has been on flooding along the James River in South Dakota. While it's too soon to know the extent of crop damage, initial reports confirm that it's bad. Yet a story of hope has emerged out of the flooding, and sometimes it's stories like these that keep us from going under.

On this particular weekend, near Menno, South Dakota, a pastor and her flock saw the waters of the James River rising, rising around their historic country church. A drive of, say, 15 miles from some farms to church stretched into a 90-mile route due to extensive flooding, bridge closings and road washouts. Those who could make it did, though — descendants of Norwegian immigrant farmers who cut stone to build the church, as well as more newcomers and nearby friends. Young and old they



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THE ACADEMY

Throughout 2019, the NALC's five national mission teams have worked hard to meet the articulated needs of our mission districts, congregations and leaders.

Through a monthly webinar series called, The Academy, we have found a light-weight and effective vehicle to deliver some of these much-needed resources.

This fall, please join the New Starts and Renewal teams as we take the next steps in this vision and dive headlong into Acts 2:42-47. Based on Bishop John Bradosky's presentation on baptism and discipleship at the Ohio Mission Region gathering, each month we will be focusing on a different portion of Acts 2.

During the first week of each month, The Academy will introduce the main topic. During each subsequent week, Pastor Trina Petersen will be hosting Ignite. Focused on discipleship and mission, Ignite will connect with congregations and leaders in a series of interviews, bringing words of encourage-



A weekly podcast
rooted in Acts 2:42-47

Focused on discipleship
and mission

www.TheNALC.org

ment, and reflections on the key portion of Acts 2 assigned to the month.

The Academy: To view past video recordings and future registration details for The Academy please visit missions.nalcnetwork.com/tag/academy.

Ignite: Visit the link below for your preferred podcast host:

Apple: apple.co/2LRtvEq

Google: bit.ly/33OWxHg

Spotify: spoti.fi/2Kd6TLz

Connect on the NALC website at thenalc.org/media.

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came, to rapidly construct a concrete block and earth floodwall around the historic "Stone Church." They've been standing 24-hour watch for signs of possible breeches in the wall. And, it's a good thing. When the rushing waters started moving the flood wall, inch by inch, closer to the church's foundation, the call went out and they came again to reinforce it. And, yes, services were held this weekend, with praise and thanks to God sounding forth from bone-weary, mud-covered folks.

The church's sign lays on the other side of the floodwall, a stone base topped by a message board, bearing witness amid the rushing flood waters. Its message is the title for this devotion: "Choose To Walk the Road of Life With Jesus."

I've been following the Stone Church story, near-real-time, on Facebook, and was able to exchange a

message with my friend and sister in Christ, Pastor Theresa Jacobson, who shepherds Our Savior's Lutheran Church (a.k.a. "Stone Church") and nearby Grace Lutheran Church. She and her flock are overwhelmed and overjoyed by the countless prayers, offers of concern and assistance that have come in as the reports circulated on Facebook. (You can see it there under "2019 Flood.")

The text and hymn that came to mind during these days, hours and exchanges: Isaiah 43:1-3a, and "On Christ the Solid Rock I Stand."

When flood waters are bearing down on our hopes and dreams, washing out familiar routes and carrying away more than we could ever imagine, the goodness and mercy of God do not fail. The hymn, "Solid Rock," puts it well. Even when "all supports are washed away," faith built on the solid rock of Christ is what sustains us. So may it be for all who read this. Amen.

FIELD REPORT FROM INDIA

By Ruth Brodeen
Executive Director, IT!

The results are in. After six weeks of rolling elections across India, Prime Minister Narendra Modi has won his reelection by a landslide. Modi will rule for another five years under the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which has strong affiliations with a Hindu extremist group called Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS).

Here are five top predictions on how this might impact the future of our mission and Christians living in India.



1. Radical Hinduism will continue to rise.

India suffers from an identity crisis. Historically, it is the birthplace of many religions, an ancient Hindu caste system and feuding tribal territories. Over the past 600 years, the Mughals and Islam entered India followed by British rule and Christianity. Pent up hatred for Muslims and Christians has reached a boiling point for some extremists. A nationalist movement created by the extremist Hindu RSS group aims to make India the first recognized Hindu country by eliminating all other religions by 2021, which doesn't seem plausible.



2. Anti-Western sentiment will increase.

The government does not want any Western influence, interference or financial support. In response to this, the Indian government is revoking the license for thousands of foreign non-profits to operate. Over the past four years, an estimated 25,000 nonprofits have been forcibly closed, including Compassion International. The RSS radical Hindu group also operates cell groups in the United States to flush out nonprofits working in India by reporting them back to the government. Lists are published weekly that announce hundreds of closures.

3. Christian persecution will sadly continue to escalate.

In the past four years, since Prime Minister Modi took office, incidences of Christian persecution have increased over 425 percent. India now ranks in the top 10 countries for Christian persecution according to Open Doors. Strong anti-conversion laws in eight states make it illegal to convert to Christianity. In other states, Indians are required to file a public

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petition to convert to Christianity. Every day Christians are murdered, their homes are raided, churches are razed, women are brutalized and families are harassed. But for Christians living in India, fear does not stop them from pursuing their destiny.

4. The prime minister is striving to improve the quality of life for all.

Over the past 15 years I have traveled to India several times. On my most recent trip, I started to notice changes in the infrastructure of the country. Pit toilets are becoming more common. Schools are installing hand wash stations. Access to education is improving. Some rural schools now have electricity. More paved roads and highways now exist; and electricity, as well as technology, is rapidly spreading. Hopefully this will continue along with a rising economy to support it despite rising unemployment figures.

5. The bottom line is that Christian nonprofit organizations operating in India have to keep a low profile if they intend to survive this political crisis for the next five years.

Words have to be carefully chosen, images carefully screened and videos cannot be too revealing. It isn't safe to assume that we can share information openly to the public. We cannot risk the lives of our brothers and sisters living out their faith in India. Our mission will remain the same as we proclaim



Christ is King in all our ministries in India. We must adapt to a rapidly deteriorating and unstable environment. To plan ahead, we must have sustainable plans that can continue to operate our programs should the funding get cut off. By paying off the school building loan, our Ministry Partner has created a sustainable plan to secure the future of our ministries so this will continue to be our focus for the next year.

It is more important now than ever before, to build up our Community Transformation Centers (CTC) with trained Christian leaders who are willing to live out their faith in action by ministering to the local needs of the community. We need more partnerships to be able to fund more CTC classes so they can continue to spread Good News across India. We are grateful for our partnership with the North American

Lutheran Church and its members for their ongoing support, especially during these challenging times.

Most of all we ask you to continue to pray for India, that obstacles will be removed, and doors opened while keeping our partners safe.

God's light shines in the darkest of places.

For additional information or to partner with IT!, please email Ruth Brodeen at indiafieldupdates@gmail.com.



DAKOTA BOYS AND GIRLS RANCH

As the Dakota Boys and Girls Ranch is a friend and Recognized Ministry of the NALC, we want you to know all about the good work your support makes possible. There may be a few things you don't know about us.

And, I believe you'll find the six Ranch facts below both enlightening and encouraging.

**Help a hurting
child succeed
in school**



For instance, did you know?

1. The Ranch's Dakota Memorial School is the only fully accredited school system in North Dakota that's not a public school.

2. Many of our children were barely passing their classes before coming to the Ranch. Yet, two out of five made the honor roll last semester, while meeting the same rigorous requirements you'll find at any public school.

3. Many of our kids never had a birthday party until they came to the Ranch.

4. This year, many of our students returned to their original schools to graduate with friends and peers.

5. We care for and cherish a herd of 23 horses. The children are encouraged to ride and make friends with the horses. They often experience healing as they ride and work with a horse.

6. Ranch thrift stores process more than 11 million donated items a year. Sales at our stores provide an important source of income to help kids.

I hope you learned something you didn't know about why the Ranch is such an incredible resource for children who have struggled to find peace, stability and success in life.

Children like Sara: Sara's mom was young, single and unable to provide for her. Violence and instability were constants in their home. No wonder Sara was angry, verbally abusive, disrespectful of authority, and hamstrung by learning disabilities that made school a daily battle

At the Ranch, Sara experienced a very different kind of environment. Because our team recognized her struggles — and also her many strengths as a unique child of God — she responded positively.

Sara says, "It didn't feel safe at my old school. But at the Ranch, if I need more help or things aren't going well at home, I can tell someone and feel safe. I don't have to worry that more bad things will happen because I told."

Sara has been with us for about a year now. Her improved attitude, behavior and school performance have earned her the admiration of her peers, who increasingly see her as a role model.

There's a lesson here: With your prayers and partnership in this work, even a deeply wounded child can find healing, academic success and spiritual growth. Thank you for your continued support!

Dakota Boys and Girls Ranch is an NALC Recognized Ministry. To learn more about their work or to partner with them in ministry, please visit dakotaranch.org.

WORLD HUNGER AND MY RESPONSE?

By Pastor David Lerseth

Do you know of anyone who is hungry? I mean really hungry?

We may say, “I am hungry or I am starving!” Really? I have personally never been in a condition of real hunger or starvation. We use the terms loosely, but I doubt anyone reading this article has ever been in the condition of having a lack of food leading to starvation.

The dictionary defines starving as “to suffer or die from extreme or prolonged lack of food.” There are many people in the world who suffer from a prolonged lack of food and most of them live in what we call the third world. As a result, the children living under such conditions, if they survive, will suffer for the rest of their lives from malnutrition.

There are many places in the world where hunger and starvation is very real, but for this article I will focus on the poverty and starvation in Madagascar.

According to the World Bank, poverty and starvation rates in Madagascar are high throughout the whole country. Here are some alarming statistics:

1. Only 35 percent of the population has access to clean water.
2. Only 15 percent of the people have access to electric power.
3. Fifty percent of the children in Madagascar are severely malnourished and 4 million people suffer from a lack of food access.
4. Southwest Madagascar is one of five locations in the world where severe drought and famine most frequently occurs.



Even though Madagascar has a large Lutheran population, no major Lutheran relief organization — nor American government relief agency or charity organization — has responded to the urgent need of this region. The region has suffered from drought for five years in a row.

Friends of Madagascar Mission has been responding as we are able by providing food to a Lutheran hospital in the southwest so the patients at the hospital will have food for healing.

We have also started Drip Irrigation Training Centers at two locations to educate residents of the region on how to grow crops in these dry conditions.

For more information on the issue of hunger in Madagascar, contact Friends of Madagascar Mission at PO Box 46381, Eden Prairie, MN 55344 or call 847-445-8177.

Friends of Madagascar Mission is an NALC Partner Ministry. You can learn more about their ministry or partner with them at madagascarmission.org.

ON INCREASING WORSHIP ATTENDANCE

Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful; and let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.

— *Hebrews 10:23-25 RSV*

One of the most common questions pastors, councils and congregations ask is: “What can we do about our declining worship attendance?”

Without a doubt, declining worship attendance is challenging, as congregations look for the “silver bullet” which will immediately and successfully bring people back to regular worship, fill the pews and strengthen struggling congregations.

One could do an interesting (and maybe depressing) sociological study of worship attendance among Christians in North America. Pew and Gallup have many polls that have led to articles trying to get at what is perceived as decline in worship attendance.

Some studies indicate that worship attendance among “Protestants” as a whole, has remained steady the last few years (Gallup, April 18, 2019). However, breaking that down clarifies that some denominations (and “non-denominations”) have seen increase in worship attendance, while mainline denominations have seen worship attendance decline, keeping the average among “Protestants” steady. Lumping all non-Catholics into a Protestant “pool” of worshipers doesn’t tell us much!

Among NALC Lutherans, in the absence of any kind of true statistical study of worship attendance, the best we have is anecdotal information. Many pastors and congregations will acknowledge that they have seen a decline in worship attendance the last few years. For this reason, it is most helpful for pastors



MINISTRY MATTERS

REV. DR. DAVID WENDEL
ASSISTANT TO THE BISHOP
FOR MINISTRY AND ECUMENISM

and congregational leaders to actually track worship attendance to be able to accurately graph whether indeed, worship attendance has declined, risen or stayed the same. If congregations would engage in such tracking, it might lead to an interesting picture of worship attendance in the congregation and in the NALC.

Wouldn’t it be helpful to know how many NALC congregations are seeing an increase in worship attendance? It would certainly surprise us to find that most congregational worship attendance is steady. If the experience of pastors is any indication, we may very well discover that, yes, worship attendance in the NALC is affected by the various factors which regularly pull people away from regular, weekly participation — meaning worship attendance is declining in many congregations.

As this is not intended to be a sociological or statistical study of NALC worship attendance patterns, I would suggest two things that may help to strengthen worship patterns within congregations.

First, let’s be intentional about tracking attendance and setting goals for growth in congregational worship attendance. Second, let’s be serious about worship as a “holy day of obligation!”

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1. Intentionality with regard to tracking worship attendance. One of the difficulties with regard to congregational worship attendance is that we are not intentional about it. In other words, we may keep track of total worship attendance, as the ushers count heads each week and record the number in the little notebook in the narthex, but are we intentional about graphing that out over time? Do we compare trends from one year to the next? Do we really know whether worship attendance (at each service) is declining, increasing, or staying the same? Are we intentional about tracking “who” is worshipping each week? How many children, youth, adults, seniors? How many visitors? What causes us to have more visitors on a given Sunday? Having an accurate understanding of worship attendance allows us to be intentional about addressing the real issues we are facing. And how do we address these issues?

As a parish pastor, I was always committed to growth by goal setting. This was true with regard to worship attendance as with everything else. Each year, as we tracked attendance accurately, our church council set a realistic goal for average Sunday (weekend) worship attendance in the coming year. We publicized this goal in the weekly bulletin, alongside worship attendance for the preceding Sunday and the previous month’s average. It wasn’t handled legalistically, nor was anyone ever berated for not being in worship. It was, however, a positive, intentional strategy for involving the entire congregation, every household and disciple of Jesus in the goal of taking Sunday worship seriously — acknowledging that we are “commanded” to “remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy,” realizing our congregation was strengthened by regular participation in worship. Congregations are excited and energized by increasing worship attendance! Congregations are demoralized by decline in worship attendance.

Remember setting goals for increasing average Sunday (weekend) worship attendance must be realistic and attainable. Increasing Sunday attendance is one of the more difficult goals to reach, as every member is tempted and lured away by the myriad distractions and diversions which are now available on Sunday mornings. Yes, often people

must work on Sunday, travel on Sunday or stay home with illness. Reminding each other of the value of sabbath keeping on the Lord’s day, as a day of worship, Word, prayer, family and rest, not only strengthens individuals and families, it also strengthens the whole Body of Christ.

Even if your congregational goal is to increase worship attendance in the coming year by three to five worshipers, celebrate that every time you reach or exceed your goal as a congregation! Communicate with the congregation how vital worship is to the life and health of a disciple and follower of Jesus and how it is vital to the life and health of the community of faith. As one seasoned pastor told me when I was just starting out in ministry, “Irregularity binds the church!” When worship attendance is irregular or in decline, it indeed hinders mission and ministry!

2. Let’s be serious about Sunday as a “holy day of obligation.” For we Lutherans who cling to the good news that we are saved by grace through faith in the death and resurrection of Jesus, we resist any discussion of “expectations” or “obligations.” Many believe that the freedom of the Gospel means “now I don’t need to do anything!” And truly, many Lutherans live that out. They don’t read and study the Word of God, they don’t respond to the Great Commission to be a disciple and make disciples, and they don’t attend worship faithfully. “Hey,” say some Lutherans, “I’m saved by grace as a gift — so it doesn’t matter if I go to church!” Which is true, in that salvation doesn’t depend upon our works, deeds or actions.

It is not true, however, that we “go to church” to save ourselves. We go to worship to receive God’s gifts of grace in Word and Sacrament. We go to worship to be in the presence of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, for strength, comfort and peace. We go to worship to respond to God’s grace with our thanks and praise, our tithes and offerings. We go to worship to support and encourage the mission and ministry of our community of faith. For all these reasons and many more, don’t we, can’t we see and acknowledge that Sunday worship is, for every baptized disciple and follower of Jesus, an obligation? And maybe even a solemn obligation, at that?

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The dictionary defines obligation as “an act or course of action to which a person is morally bound; a duty or a commitment; a debt of gratitude.” As a husband, father and grandfather, I have a solemn, holy obligation to my wife, children and grandchildren. As a pastor in the NALC, I have obligations to my bishop, my fellow staff and the church. As a Christian, I have obligations to my Lord — one of which is to “remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy,” “to not forsake the gathering together” of believers on Sunday, as is the habit of some. Isn’t worship a solemn, holy obligation for us as Christians? Isn’t it helpful for us to understand it in this way? Isn’t this why Hebrews exhorts us *not* to neglect the weekly worship of the congregation?

We Lutherans have often criticized or even mocked our Roman Catholic brothers and sisters for understanding Sunday mass as the “foremost holy day of obligation” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2192.) Certainly, Sunday worship should never be viewed legalistically, whether by a Roman Catholic, Lutheran or Baptist!

As my obligations as a pastor, husband and father are not a demand placed upon me, but a joy and a delight, it is for us Christians to view the obligation of Sunday worship in the same way — a joy and a delight! We are blessed to have the freedom to worship week after week! We are blessed to have congregations — communities of faith in which we can live out our faith, share our faith and worship our God who is truly, “God with us!” We are blessed to be called to be disciples of Jesus Christ, walking alongside other disciples, gathering together each week to receive the gift of Jesus, Himself, incarnate in the bread and wine that become His very presence in the Lord’s Supper!

In most of our congregations, decline in worship attendance is not due to loss of members, but due to members who choose not to worship on a given Sunday. A renewal in our understanding of worship and intentionality with regard to worship in our congregations may, in small ways, with small steps, turn the tide of declining worship attendance!

Do you have a story to tell with regard to worship attendance in your congregation? Is your worship attendance stable or increasing? Send me an email at dwendel@thenalc.org and share your story! I will attempt to include your story in an upcoming Ministry Matters.

THE BIBLE AS THE WORD OF GOD STATEMENT

The Bible as the Word of God Statement and Study Guide booklet from the NALC’s Commission on Theology and Doctrine is available for use by individuals and congregations.

At Lutheran Week, each participant received a copy of the booklet. Additional copies of the booklet are available for \$1.25 plus shipping. To purchase additional printed copies, please contact the NALC office at office@thenalc.org or 651-633-6004.

The statement with the study guide is available for download in the 2019 Lutheran Week Archive, thenalc.org/2019-lutheran-week-archive. The statement without the study guide — and other NALC statements — may be downloaded from the NALC website at thenalc.org/nalc-statements.

Let’s keep in touch

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