

# **Reform: The Repentance of the Church**

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## **Introduction:**

Christ is risen! And that changes everything!

Thank you for the invitation to this WordAlone gathering and for this opportunity to address you. This is my first time at a WordAlone event, and not everyone thinks it is a good idea I am here. A business man I admire is a patriot for freedom and a friend of WordAlone. He wrote to me recently accusing me of caving in and the ELCA of compromising Christian freedom. In his view, the ELCA is Enron. Luther Seminary is Arthur Andersen, covering up. I think not! But I know he speaks from deep concern. Another friend, a pastor who supported the exceptions, told me in the presence of several leaders, he was anguished to see my name in the ads for this gathering. "Let's move on," he said, "You are aiding WordAlone's negative spirit." A committed churchwide leader commented, "It

won't matter what you say. The damage is done." Let's prove them all wrong!

Last summer before the churchwide assembly, I called three of your leaders including our friend in faith, Al Quie. I expressed my hope that the resolution allowing exceptions to the requirement of the historic episcopate would pass the assembly. I proposed that if it did, WordAlone could turn its energies toward the mission to which God is calling our church and not indulge in self-righteousness. Soon after the exceptions passed by the required two thirds (and not much more), Al Quie invited me to address this assembly. When I heard that Mike Foss and Jim Nestingen were also invited, I could not refuse.

I have come to say "Thank you." I have also come to call WordAlone, Luther Seminary, and all of us in our church to repentance and hope in God.

The “thank you” is genuine, and it extends beyond WordAlone. Let me express my gratitude quite personally and as a member of the body of Christ.

To speak personally, I have been deeply committed to Lutheran ecumenism and often disappointed by the ecclesiastical politics of ecumenism in the ELCA. While serving in three ecumenical conversations, I heard our clean and distinctive language of “agreement in the Gospel” and “altar and pulpit fellowship” displaced by a diffuse, ecclesial rhetoric of “full communion.” I helped write the Lutheran Reformed agreement to move us on to our public and pastoral witness and work with the walls down. The virtue of that agreement is that it claims the unity we already have in the Gospel of Jesus Christ and calls us to mutual accountability.

I also strongly support the long history of our efforts toward fellowship with the Episcopal Church USA. Yearning for us to own the calling God has given both churches in this nation and world, I even favor strong bishops. A church in mission needs leaders who can make good things happen. I do not fear or favor the historic episcopate as a symbolic office. The memory of bishops who withstood kings may be as dear to the Reformation in England as our icon of the Saxon monk who took his stand against papal indulgences. If it would help me to communicate Christ Jesus, I would wear a black suit or carry prayer beads. But when symbols become requirements, if a tradition of succession becomes normative as the source and norm of validity for the Gospel itself, the answer is, “No!”

When “Called to Common Mission” narrowly passed in Denver in 1999, I spoke briefly to my Episcopal friend Canon Robert Wright, watched the Joint Agreement with the Roman Catholics on Justification roll through with almost no theological discussion, and left the assembly in anguish.

People I love and trust were thrilled by visions of new unity for the church, but I sensed that this legislated necessity would be destructive to the unity of our church and dangerous to our convictions of the liberating power of the gospel.

It was a time to “watch and pray.” My concern extended to my calling. At Luther Seminary, we had been at work for a decade, listening for the Holy Spirit’s calling throughout the church. We were already committed to equip our graduates for a new time of mission. For 18 months, we had been devising a plan to keep the promise. Would all that promise be dragged down by old European schemes of ecclesiastical authority?

God brings us into times of repentance in our weakness and in our strength. This was a time of weakness, seeking to discern God’s way when my path was not clear. This

was also a time of great strength, just not my strength. Again and again the witness of the living Lord in Acts 1:6-8 and Isaiah 49:6 has converted my heart from disappointment to hope, not optimism - I must add - but hope in God. Some of you know these verses were key to an address I gave to an Lutheran-Episcopal gathering in St. Louis where I appealed for the exceptions as a form of the repentance of the church, turning toward God's calling to common mission.

My theme is the same today, in a very different moment. Just listen to the enduring force of the Word of God, actually two words now spoken to WordAlone.

The first is from Jesus' last words on earth to his apostles as they bring their agenda for ratification. "Lord will you now restore the kingdom to Israel?" It's a fair question, spoken in hope of God's promises, confident Jesus' resurrection is the vindication of his messianic rule. But Jesus turns them around, converts them, and calls them again to his purpose and plan. Then they will receive the Spirit's power.

Our risen Lord speaks. "It is not for you to know the times or the periods that the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

The second is the scriptural word the risen Christ was interpreting, the Word of God from Isaiah 49:6. Returning from Exile, Israel was filled with expectation of the restoration of their former glory. I hear some of that among Lutherans. And God does not diminish the glory, but turns it, transforms it. Israel's glory is not just to be splendid and prosperous. The church's hope is not the restoration of a shining past of Christendom with princes and lands, nor the sacred past of our immigrant folk churches scattered like seed on the prairies of the new world. "It is too light a thing," says the Lord, "that's good, but not good enough." "It is too light a thing that you should be my servant ... to restore the survivors of Israel, I will give you as a light to the nations that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth."

**The reform of the church is not another agenda, not a restoration of the past, it is a repentance, a turning toward the future to which God is calling us.**

That is the point of what I have come to tell you, and I will return to it. First let me recite my threefold thanksgiving, personally and as a member of the body.

As I watched and prayed in the months following the adoption of CCM, my perspective was personal, but it was also that of the president of Luther Seminary. That calling is not about me any more or any less than your calling as pastor is just about you.

Adversity is not only the mother of opportunity, as every entrepreneur will attest, but God gets our attention when we hit the wall. “My grace is sufficient for you,” says the Lord. “Watch and pray that you enter not into temptation.”

The first thing I saw in late 1999 was that the Luther Seminary faculty had not lost heart. They were hammering away at 10 drafts of our strategic plan called “Serving the Promise of our Mission.” We had already committed ourselves to serve an alternative future for our church, a missional future, and they were not about to quit. Faculty hate to be distracted from their work by planning processes. But they just kept pushing. The final draft was endorsed in December, 1999, without dissent! I was amazed! Listen to the first sentence. “We believe God is calling and sending the Church of Jesus Christ into apostolic mission in the 21st century world of many cultures and religions.”

“So, sinner!” said the Spirit, “Still sad?” No way! Let’s do it!

You can read the plan on our website. I have no illusions that all faculty agree on every point in the plan. We argue like crazy as we implement each step, and we should. God only knows how the seminary can best repent, that is, turn its strengths toward the future to which God is calling the church. But we do believe God is calling and sending the Church of Jesus Christ into apostolic mission in the 21st century world of many cultures and religions, and we are acting in that faith. That shared conviction has restored my soul and sustained my calling as president.

The second thing I saw was the adamant good faith of your WordAlone leaders. It’s true, some folks on both sides got pretty grouchy and self-righteous, but brother Quie and Roger Eigenfeld and Jaynan and many others kept looking for a way to get us there together, not split by a political triumph in an assembly. Then Claire Strommen and Mark Hanson put together the consultation in Milwaukee. That meeting happened because, like our faculty, WordAlone wouldn’t quit either.

I have come to thank you because I believe the Milwaukee meeting saved the unity of our church. Your leaders were there, and our Dean, Marc Kolden, and many people of good will from all sides of the CCM debate. The meeting itself was unpopular in several quarters of the ELCA. We must not forget the risk that Mark Hanson took in convening the meeting. Wise heads had told him not to do it, and the ELCA leadership seemed intent on ignoring the strong recommendations.

But the scene had changed. I wish I could have heard the closed sessions in the Bishops’ conference that led to their endorsement of possible exceptions for ordinations. Then the church council had to do something, and they also approved over strenuous objections from official ecumenical quarters. It came right down to the assembly last

summer where Bishop Anderson endorsed the recommendation, Jim Nestingen represented our confessional convictions with courage, and Mark Hanson, a strong advocate of possible exceptions, was elected presiding bishop.

Miracles happen! And we thank God, and we repent and believe.

Now let me turn to my third thanksgiving, each of them a wonder.

- 1) The Luther faculty persisted in turning the seminary toward the future to which God is calling the church.
- 2) WordAlone and others of good faith and courage persevered in lifting the necessity of the historic episcopate without dividing the church. And
- 3) Our presiding bishop has called us to turn our church toward mission.

From the beginning, many of us thought the exceptions were about mission. Some of you are urgently concerned that we have lots of them as soon as possible. I agree that we need a few good exceptions. As Al Quie said, “Everybody in the Soviet Union also had the right to own a car, but nobody could get one.” And I’ll admit a perverse hope that the first exceptions come from outside the mid-west.

But what matters is that the Gospel is unbound! In Acts as soon as the requirement of circumcision was removed (15.19), the Gentile mission was empowered. Paul was even free to circumcise Timothy for the sake of the Jewish mission (16.9). Once the possibility of pastors ordaining pastors was grasped in Germany, the Roman grip on the means of grace was broken. Ordination by bishops continued many places, sometimes wise, sometimes cruel, but bishops are not theologically necessary for valid ministry. For good order, we observe many rules from the law of our land and of our church. Our calling is to serve Christ.

Bishop Mark Hanson has announced a calling. He is delivering a message.

1. It’s about mission!
2. It’s about leadership!
3. It’s about ecumencial and inter-faith relationships!
4. It’s about engaging questions like homosexuality with faith and courage.

I have never voted in a bishop’s election. I had no candidate last August. I am not running for any office. But I have heard Mark Hanson ring the chimes of this four-fold calling for our church, I have watched him listen to the bishops, the theologians, and

the saints in Eastern North Dakota. He is seeking the wisdom of the church and calling each group to bring their wisdom and strength.

“Preach it brother! Stay on message for a decade, and keep listening! Call all of us to mission, to leadership, to evangelical ecumenism, to faithful deliberation.”

This call is not just from Mark Hanson. Our good bishop is a forgiven sinner like the rest of us. He needs and deserves our prayers. Fan clubs are for optimists. Hope runs deep. Honoring his calling means listening for God’s voice in his words.

Have you heard of the Stockwell Paradox? Admiral Stockwell was a POW, confined for long months in the Viet Nam prison camp called the Hanoi Hilton. He received a purple heart and a Congressional Medal of Honor for his fierce tenacity, his undivided loyalty to his men, his unshaken courage and hope. Beaten, starved, isolated, even cutting himself to prevent being used for propaganda, Stockwell decided from day one that he would see his wife again. He watched many men die. He helped many others survive. In the light of his unswerving confidence that he would survive, he was once asked, “Which prisoners died?” He said immediately, “The optimists! They promised themselves it will soon be better. Things will improve by Christmas. We will be out by summer. They died of false hopes.”

When the apostle Paul stood in chains before the Roman procurator and King Agrippa, they could not grasp why was he so confident? The answer was not, “Oh, it’s not too bad in prison.” It was not, “Thank you for noticing my virtuous positive thinking.” No, the apostle answered, “I have a hope in God!” That hope is filled with God’s resurrection of the crucified Jesus (Acts 24:15; 26:4-23).

It’s not that the hard times of the ecumenical disputes are past. Just wait! The next struggle may be harder. It’s not that Mark Hanson walks on water. It’s not how swell Luther Seminary is, but your contributions are welcome. The Gospel truth is, sinful humans killed Jesus, but he is alive. God’s love for the world is restored. The theology of the cross is a theology of mission because the risen Christ said so. My witness to WordAlone is not, “Cheer up, get on board.” It is, “Repent, turn toward God’s apostolic calling for our church in a world of many cultures and religions.”

I have a cartoon of a prophet carrying a sign, “Repent!” with an asterisk. The asterisk says in small print, “If you have already repented, please disregard this notice.” Reform sounds like hard work. Repenting is turning to hope in God.

Let’s go to work on Bishop Hanson’s agenda. He is asking the church to pay attention. The risen Jesus is calling us to turn outside of ourselves toward mission.

- 1) It's about mission!
- 2) It's about leadership!
- 3) Its about ecumencial and inter-faith relationships!
- 4) Its about engaging questions like homosexuality with faith and courage.

The mission worthy of repentance is God's. The Triune God's mission is dynamic love for and with the world. "God so loved the world that he sent the only begotten Son." "In Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us." Our lives are changed, captured in God's desire to draw all people into this love.

No other mission is worthy of the church, particularly a church called to be the *Evangelical, Lutheran, Church, in America*. At our best, Lutherans have long understood our evangelical calling is to places and contexts in the real world. That is the world God so loves, not some abstract ideal. "We have this treasure in clay jars so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us." So we start with 11,000 communities, places where the word is preached, the sacraments administered, and from which the saints are sent, scattered like apostolic synagogues through America, with 65 geographic Synods, colleges and seminaries in three clusters, and a churchwide organization to help.

Many congregations, leaders, and institutions dissipate their resources, their energies, their passions in chewing on each other or blaming someone else. Augustine's definition of sin fits us too well. We are curved in on ourselves.

The whole church is called to repent, to turn outside itself to God's love for the world. This room is full of people who honor the Gospel with faithful ministry. You are servants of the Word and leaders of Christ's mission. Your wisdom and commitment to the calling ahead is crucial. Turn toward God's future. You are it!

Whatever specific work you pursue, whatever language you borrow or song you sing in your place, may your script for mission be inspired by two profound Biblical convictions. These are also hallmarks of the Lutheran Reformation. The first is God's love for sinners. The second is God's blessing of all the saints to be a blessing in the world: justification and vocation, sinner and saint, called and sent! The subject of the verb is always God, and God turns you into an agent.

We try to teach our students to go into congregations with the question, "What is God doing in this place?" This is more than, "How are things going?" But then they are

looking for signs of the living Lord. This may be disturbing. Lutheran Christians often feel entitled, as if God's tender mercy is comfortable as well as comforting. Justification by grace turns out to be God's mission to other people. Jesus measured his mission by referring to outsiders. "The blind see, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them" (Lk 7:22)

We live in a consumer society. You produce or your net worth is zero. Justification by faith is a protest and a promise of the Father's unfailing love.

Our kids are indoctrinated with 5,000 hours of television before they start school. The internet brings access to amazing resources from all over the world, and porn creeps in with it. The spiral of violence rises. Children strap explosives to their bodies, and air strikes pour in on villages, in the name of Abraham's God. Our thirst for oil is unquenchable. Who will save us from this body of death?

Our Lutheran bishop in Bethlehem describes their life as *marturia*. Their only power the gospel, they struggle to keep Arab children in school. Palestinian gunmen occupy their churches, and the Israelis shoot out the windows. God is in ungodly arenas. *Marturia* is vulnerable as the crucified Jesus and strong as his life.

The cure for the world's warring madness is wrought on the Savior's hands. Justification by grace means personal pardon. God's righteous mission is also public, with justice and healing for the oppressed, served by the *marturia* of forgiven sinners. "In Christ, God was reconciling the world." And Christ is risen!

When, if ever, has God's mission of justification been more needed?

And when, if ever, has the Lord provided more capacity in the church?

Two weeks ago, forty pastors attended our continuing education event. In collaboration with the Lutheran fraternal, now *Thrivent*, Luther Seminary began an initiative called *Centered Life~Centered Work*. We hope to help congregations and businesses mobilize the gifts of God's people for their callings in the world, and this effort is already underway in many places. The Roman Catholics and the Evangelicals are out in front, but Lutherans have strengths to bring on vocation.

It's about "the priesthood of believers," but that still sounds like who is or is not ordained. It is about the mission of the baptized, including clergy. It is about the freedom of the Christian to be Christ to the neighbor.

Thomas Jefferson and his friends had powerful ideas about freedom, but they

focused on rights, the entitlements of gentlemen. Landowners, all of them, slave holders, some - including Jefferson, built the Constitution on the conviction that all men like them are “endowed by their Creator with inalienable rights,” including life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. The vast bounty of this new land and the diversity of its inhabitants brought that promise to bright fulfillment. The dream became ever more inclusive, transcending, race, gender, and class. At her best, Lady Liberty has held her torch of welcome high to the world’s oppressed.

The deep conviction of Christian freedom is more responsible, less entitled. Freedom is no endowment of a distant deity, but God’s gift for forgiven sinners for the sake of the world. Justified by God’s grace through faith in Jesus Christ, we are free from bondage to sin and to death. Our ordinary lives are captured in God’s love for the world. “A Christian,” declared Luther, “is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all.”

Now imagine 11,000 worshipping communities alive to this mission, called and sent into apostolic mission in a world of many cultures and religions. Imagine!

Called together to receive God’s mercy, sinners as we all are, and sent out to bear God’s love to all in need. Some go to work in industries or shops or courts or schools or hospitals. Some exercise their vocations primarily in their homes. Some do the work of the church, *per se*. Others spend their days in public service. What if all of our congregations, all of our church offices, all of our seminaries and our colleges were committed to equip the saints for their callings in the world? What would it take? Can you imagine the blessing such Christian freedom could have?

1) It’s about mission, and 2) it’s about leadership.

Leadership is about relationships. Andrew found Peter and led him to Jesus. Leadership makes sense in a time of mission. We will authorize someone to lead us, but only if there is a journey, a destination, and a purpose to the trip. The old Germans from my part of the church were suspicious of pastors who wanted to stir them up or, God forbid, introduce changes. They told the District President, “just send us a German Shepherd to take care of us.” They said what they meant.

In the early 90’s after listening processes all over the church, we at Luther Seminary moved toward a curricular strategy to educate leaders for Christian communities in mission. In 1995, the Study of Theological Education sounded this theme for all of our seminaries. At times, we have worried our graduates would find their churches didn’t want leadership at all. They intended to hold out and they expected to be taken care of until the doors closed. Some of that continues, as you know better than I,

and some pastors have been arrogant leaders. The kingdom of God has not arrived with some new leadership paradigm!

But the Holy Spirit is stirring the church. It is happening globally, no doubt, as Christianity is rapidly becoming a non-western religion. “Your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,” declares Peter in Acts, quoting Joel, young and old, men and women, with more forms of ministry than any bureaucracy will ever regulate.

Before we thought we had a pastor shortage, the GIFTS program in the prairies had enrolled 200 people. The parish nurses are showing up in force, and don’t ever suggest this is not ministry. The Master’s Institute here at North Heights is a new version of a Bible school, not awaiting anyone’s accreditation. At Luther Seminary, Roland Martinson gets hundreds of calls every year for our few youth leadership graduates. They lead young people and their families to follow Jesus.

Last week we had 500 high school kids on campus with their pastors for the Previews program, which was invented by pastors, led by Paul Youngdahl. These kids were thrilled to be invited by their pastors to visit the seminary and consider what God wants them to do with their lives. Some may become pastors, some youth leaders or musicians or church professionals. Every one has heard the idea that God has something to do through their lives. I want to challenge every pastor, every congregation here to do three things: 1) “pray the Lord of the harvest to send laborers into his harvest,” 2) identify 1-3 young people every year who could be one of the missionary leaders the church already needs, and 3) commit yourself to invest your support and to attract others to help us make apostles out of disciples.

Together let’s also rally to support our Lutheran Colleges, campus ministries, and whatever vocational schools we know. Where are the “teachable moments?” When do young people catch the vision that forgiven and loved by God, they are also called and sent to be a blessing to the world and their neighbors? Consider the wealth of leadership that already exists in the early retirees in many congregations. These people are already successful, but they yearn for significance. This might be a step for your congregation toward equipping the saints for callings in the world.

Bishop Hanson is right. In a world of many cultures and religions, it’s about mission. It’s about leadership. And it is also about ecumenism and deliberation.

The coming ecumenism is much more exciting and much more difficult. We are grateful for good relationships that exist among churches of European origin, but the rising tide is from the Southern Hemisphere. In 1910, 80% of the world’s identified Christians were in Europe or North America. Today 60% are in the Southern

Hemisphere. More Anglicans gather for Sunday worship in Keyna than in Europe. In recent years, more mosques have been built in London than churches.

Friends, we are about to get a new set of challenges to our confession of Jesus as Lord and our confidence of God's love for all the world. A time of apostolic mission is yeasty, firey, and windy, hard on old wineskins, but alive to God. Here we are gathered at North Heights Lutheran Church. Remember how some people were afraid of the charismatic movement disrupting the church. Now we are imploring the leaders of this Spirit stirred congregation to stay with us.

On Friday, I visited with a nun who is a long time friend about the current agonies in the Roman Catholic Church. She is an academic, a leader in theological education, and a loyal Franciscan. She shook her head, "Maybe God will use this disaster of the misuse of authority to awaken the church," she said. "What would you hope to see?" I asked. She replied, "The renewal of the vocations of the laity!"

Maybe God will bless our Church with the same. Nobody thinks the current discussion about sexuality and homosexuality will be easy. Check our website for the public deliberations we have scheduled from May until December. Get ready to read a spectacular essay Jim Nestingen is writing about the strengths we bring to this deliberation from the Lutheran tradition of justification and vocation.

But, above all, pray for the power of the Holy Spirit for the whole Body. We are clearly in a time when our whole nation, including our church, must turn away from the false promises of sexual freedom based in our rights and privileges. Our self-indulgent and sexualized culture scorns the sixth commandment, and children and the poor suffer. Christian freedom remains freedom to bless the world.

**The reform of the church is not another agenda, not a restoration of the past, it is a repentance, a turning toward the future to which God is calling us.**

Thank you for inviting me to speak at a time of the renewal of WordAlone. Grateful for your perseverance in difficult times, I urge you now to turn toward the future to which God is calling and sending the Church of Jesus Christ, a time of apostolic mission in a world of many cultures and religions.

1. It is about mission! And the God who justifies sinners is at work among us in God's love, God's desire for all people to learn and follow Jesus.
2. It's about leadership! Pray the Lord of the harvest to send laborers, including pastors, equipping all the saints for their callings in the world.

3. It's about ecumencial and inter-faith relationships! Because the world God loves is a world of many cultures and religions.
4. It's about engaging questions like homosexuality with faith and courage. The freedom for which Christ set us free is a calling to bless the world.

Thanks be to God! May God bless all of you in your ministries and families.