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Editor's Note

Whenever I present at LCMS pastors conferences, I often start by asking, “Who was your soul care professor at seminary?” I list them for CSL (since circa 1975): Martin Haendschke, Charles Knippel, Joseph Barbour, Brian Salminen, Bruce Hartung, Rick Marrs, and Mark Rockenbach (I have a list of CTSFW professors as well, which includes my college mentor, John Saleska). I have personally known each of these professors (except for Barbour), and each has had an impact on how I think and teach about the care of souls. I’m sure each CSL graduate has been impacted by one or more of these soul care professors.

I also routinely get the question: What are you, the faculty, emphasizing about soul care at Concordia Seminary now? I thought I would take this opportunity to answer that question more broadly, and for the sake of history for future generations. In the twenty years I have now taught the one required course in soul care at CSL, I/we have emphasized:

1. Biblical and theological foundations of soul care.
2. Listening Skills.
3. Peacemaking and reconciliation skills.
4. Referral issues.
5. Premarital counseling and weddings.
6. Grief issues and funerals.
7. Pastoral visitations and the *Pastoral Care Companion*.
8. Recognizing and caring for those with mental disorders.

Role playing to practice these developing skills is included within all these areas. It is a lot to pack into one fourteen-week class. I envy other CSL professors who have more than one course in the curriculum for their subjects (exegesis, systematics, history, homiletics). Soul care has only one required course, currently taken during the spring semester prior to vicarage. I estimate that a little over 40 percent of our students in the past twenty years have taken at least one pastoral care elective course. Allow me to flesh out each of those eight areas listed above.

Biblical and theological foundations of soul care: We currently use my book, *Making Christian Counseling More Christ Centered*, to introduce students on how Luther’s biblical theology is focused on the care of souls. I assert that the reason we

learn exegetical, systematic, and historical theology is, ultimately, for the care of souls. Later, when we discuss referral issues, I emphasize that our pastoral responsibility of the care of souls is now shared with counselors who are Christians. Professional counselors have more training and expertise in addressing the First Article, biopsychosocial damage aspects of the care of souls, but pastors should fully embrace their primary role as bringing Second and Third Article messages of the gospel when the souls assigned to their spiritual care are suffering and groaning in this creation. We also emphasize the importance of confession and forgiveness, including Individual Confession and Absolution (ICA). Students read and discuss Walter Koehler's book *Counseling and Confession* (Concordia Publishing House, 1984; Concordia Seminary Press, 2011) about the benefits of Lutherans and their pastors practicing ICA.

We also spend about two weeks on listening skills. After an initial lecture about developing these skills, the students role-play short vignettes with each other to practice their listening skills. Those role plays often start off a little stilted, but after practicing with various classmates in various scenarios, most students do show the skills of being able to empathetically show people, using an emotional vocabulary, that they are striving to listen to them. I have had many seminarian wives tell me that their husbands became better listeners after these two weeks! At the end of the semester, each student participates in a longer, more detailed role play to show that they can begin to integrate those listening skills in with the other skills they have developed in the semester.

Mark Rockenbach and I both highly value what we have learned from Ambassadors of Reconciliation, and what a difference those teachings made in our pastoral ministries before being called to teach at Concordia Seminary. Students read the AoR Bible Study *Go and Be Reconciled*. We emphasize the importance of helping counselees identify what they fear, crave, and trust more than their Lord, with the goal of guiding them to repent of their idols and to receive Christ's forgiveness daily. We recently added the Ted Kober and Rockenbach book *Unforgivable?* (Concordia Publishing House, 2024) to the class reading list.

In the pre-2017 curriculum, wedding and funeral sermons ("occasional sermons") were taught in a Homiletics 2 course. Now they are part of the Pastoral Care course, integrated into instruction about premarital counseling and grief/funerals. For Premarital Counseling, students are required to receive the online training of SYMBIS (Saving Your Marriage Before It Starts). They then guide a volunteer couple through a SYMBIS feedback session, so that their first premarital counseling in the parish will not be their first time through such a program. We also inform them of other premarital counseling systems available to them (such as, Prepare-Enrich, C-PREP, ZOE score). We encourage students to develop their own theological emphases for the couples they will guide toward marriage. We walk through details of the wedding service and have them write a wedding sermon (typically based on Ephesians 5).

Many recent college graduates have had little first-hand experience with profound grief caused by the death of a loved one, so we spend some time teaching about grief, and how pastors so often practice a “theology of presence” while walking alongside their members in grief. We walk through the funeral service and its options; students then exegete 1 Thessalonians 4:13ff and write a funeral sermon based on that text. We hope that they will then receive more real-world experience with weddings and funerals while they are on vicarage.

Throughout the semester we walk students through the *Pastoral Care Companion* (Concordia Publishing House), and its many helpful sections for choosing Scripture passages and voicing prayers when they visit their people in hospitals, nursing homes, and the myriad of other circumstances where they will be providing care for their souls.

The last couple of weeks of lecture and discussion focus on a basic knowledge of various mental disorders that they will encounter in the congregation and community. We discuss the strengths and shortcomings of the DSM-5 (*Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*) approach, and that they as pastors and deaconesses will not be the diagnostician but may likely be the first to refer them to someone who could be helpful with their biopsychosocial damage. We briefly hit upon types of depression and anxiety disorders, schizophrenia, PTSD (including physical and sexual abuse), intellectual disabilities and autism, disorders like Tourette Syndrome, bi-polar disorder, substance abuse, and so on. We also discuss the complexities in caring for the souls of those who struggle with LGBTQ issues and to do so with biblical and confessional integrity.

We also require students to *receive* five sessions of counseling from either a professional counselor, a pastor/chaplain, or a spiritual director. While some students are apprehensive about this assignment (and sometimes ask, “What should I talk about?”), once they have finished nearly all report that it was a positive experience. We think it is important for soul care givers to have a sense of what it feels like to have someone else counsel and care for their soul before they start striving to care for others.

This class is a lot to pack into one semester, and I pray that those who have learned from me during these past two decades have found that the course was beneficial, if not sufficient, in caring for the souls of others. I pray that this *Concordia Journal* issue will continue to help you, the reader, better care for the souls of those the Lord puts in your path.

Rick Marrs
Guest Editor

Articles

Transgenderism

The Current State of Gender Identity and Godly Ways to Respond

Mark Rockenbach



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Sexual identity is a gift from God that takes place at conception. You are born biologically either a male or a female. “So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them” (Gn 1:27). God does not say anything about being able to choose your own sex. Your biological sex was given to you by God. And what God has made is good. Scripture says, “God

saw all that he had made, and it was very good” (Gn 1:31). Paul wrote to Timothy, “For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, for it is made holy by the word of God and prayer” (1 Tm 4:4–5). Your biological sex of being either male or female should not be rejected. We give thanks to God for giving us this gift of being male or female. However, there are many people who are rejecting their biological sex and living as if God has made a mistake.

Rejecting God’s will for our lives is nothing new. Adam and Eve rejected God when they disobeyed his command, “You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die” (Gn 2:16–17). The Israelites rejected God’s will for their lives when they made the golden calf. God said to Moses, “They have turned aside quickly out of the way that I commanded them. They have made for themselves a golden calf and have worshiped it and sacrificed to it” (Ex 32:8). The elders of Israel demanded of Samuel that God give them a king. God said to Samuel “for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected me from being king over them” (1 Sm 8:7).

Rejecting God's will for our lives is an ongoing battle. The Large Catechism's explanation of the first commandment says, "They all made a god out of what their heart most desired."¹ Idolatry is when we allow our hearts to cling to something other than God. God's word is clear that he created us male and female. When we desire to be a sex that has not been given to us, we sin against God and against our neighbors. We sin against God because we have set our heart on something that is not part of God's will for our lives. We sin against our neighbors because we are living a vocation that has not been given to us. A woman has a holy vocation of bearing children and being a helpmate to the man that she marries. When a woman decides that she is going to live as a man, she rejects the vocation of being a woman. A man has a holy vocation of caring for his wife and providing for his family. When a man decides that he is going to live as a woman, he rejects the vocation of being a man. The rejection of God's gift will bring hardship. When Adam and Eve rejected the gift of living in a sinless creation, their experience changed. There was now pain in childbearing; they had to work the land. The ground was cursed with thorns and thistles that made it more difficult to produce food (Gn 3). There were earthly consequences for sinning against God and rejecting his gift.

But God has not rejected his creation. God promised Adam and Eve that he would not abandon them but send a savior that would crush the head of the serpent (Gn 3:14–15). "But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons" (Gal 4:4–5). Paul's letter to the Corinthians is clear that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of heaven, "neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God" (1 Cor 6:9–10). Yet, there is hope for the person who has rejected God. "And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God" (1 Cor 6:11). Those who repent will be forgiven and have a place in God's kingdom.

Gender Ideology

When a person is struggling with life, they are often encouraged to attend mental health counseling. In many cases counselors can help people articulate the issue and provide various treatment to lessen the symptoms. However, the counseling community has been moving in the direction of affirming care. In general, this means that the counselor does not always challenge the feelings, thoughts, and behaviors of a person. Instead, the counselor will affirm the behaviors and assist the client to find ways to satisfy whatever desires they have. This approach has become the cornerstone of addressing sexuality for those who identify with the LGBTQ+ community. Mental health counselors tend to affirm LGBTQ+ feelings, thoughts, and behaviors rather than challenging them.

This is reflected in the process for diagnosing sexual issues. The mental health community relies on *The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-5-TR) for diagnosis. When a person seeks out a mental health counselor to address their sexual identity the person is often diagnosed with gender dysphoria. The DSM-5-TR provides this definition of gender dysphoria, “Gender dysphoria as a general descriptive term refers to the distress that may accompany the incongruence between one’s experienced or expressed gender and one’s assigned gender.”²

The DSM-5-TR also makes a distinction between sex and gender. “Sex and sexual refer to the biological indicators of male and female (understood in the context of reproductive capacity)” while “gender is used to denote the public, sociocultural (and usually legally recognized) lived role as boy or girl, man or woman, or other gender.”³ The DSM-5-TR acknowledges that culturally the words sex and gender are no longer synonyms. The DSM-5-TR does complement our theological understanding of sex. However, the word gender, which is not a biblical word, tends to confuse our understanding of sexuality.

John Money used the word gender to promote his idea that chromosomes and anatomy were irrelevant to the male and female identities. He used the term gender identity to say that sexual identity is more about how you feel rather than how society has socialized you to think about yourself.⁴

John Money is famously known for an experiment he conducted that promoted gender ideology. In 1965 Janet and Ron Reimer gave birth to identical twin boys, named Bruce and Brian. During Bruce’s circumcision his penis was burned beyond repair. John Money convinced the parents to raise Bruce as a girl. The parents were distraught and trusted the medical advice of John Money. Bruce was castrated and female appearing genitalia were constructed. Bruce became Brenda and started taking female hormones. John Money was quick to tell the world that his experiment was a success.⁵ However, Money gave an over glorification of what really took place. At the age of thirty-two Brenda went public and described the devastating experience he endured living as a female. Brenda eventually became David, got married and adopted children.⁶ Later interviews with David and Brian revealed that Money had sexually abused them. Brian overdosed at the age of thirty-two, and David committed suicide at the age of thirty-eight.

John Money was heavily influenced by Alfred Kinsey. Kinsey convinced people that it was normal to engage in homosexual activities and pornography. He encouraged people to explore their sexuality and even indulge in bestiality. Both Money and Kinsey were social reformers who wanted to rid the world of religious values. Kinsey’s experiments collected data from sex offenders, child molesters, and prisoners. Many have criticized his population sampling and challenged the idea that our understanding of sex should be based upon a group of people that do not represent a moral society. In addition, Kinsey did experiments on children where he

reported on the orgasms in over 300 children between the ages of two months and fifteen years.⁷

Experimenting on children tends to be a central thread among those promoting gender ideologies. Kinsey and Money used their research to introduce a gender spectrum rather than a sexual binary. Their influence has been imbedded into every corner of our society. Professionals in the medical and psychological world are experimenting upon children when they give them puberty blockers, cross hormone drugs, and reassignment surgeries. It is the children that are the target for this abuse. And this is by design.

The gay choir from San Francisco produced a video in 2021 that clearly laid out the agenda. The video starts with a single male smiling and singing:

You think we're sinful,
You say we all lead lives you don't respect,
But you're just frightened.
You think that we'll corrupt your kids if our agenda goes unchecked.
Funny, just this once, you're correct.
We'll convert your children,
Happens bit by bit,
Quietly and subtly and you will barely notice it.
We're coming for them.
We're coming for your children.
We're coming for them.
We're coming for your children.⁸

The Western Journal reported that four of the choir members were identified as registered sex offenders.⁹ They are no longer hiding the agenda. They are coming after your children. Parents, teachers, and those who work with youth will tell you that children are struggling with their sexual identity. However, the struggle is being instigated by the LGBTQ+ community.

Public schools around the country along with liberal religious organizations are promoting gender identity and LGBTQ+. You might think that this is only being taught in high schools. Yet, preschoolers across the country are being encouraged to choose a gender that does not match their biological sex. Initially they were introduced to the gingerbread man.¹⁰ This diagram is a cartoon of a gingerbread man with gender labels. Over time people complained that the diagram was promoting only one gender, a man. Therefore, an updated cartoon of a unicorn was created.¹¹ The unicorn is colorful and encourages children to explore the endless buffet of genders.

Children often engage in magical thinking. They pretend they are a pirate, a wizard, a superhero, or a princess. It is easy for them to believe in things that are not

real. That is what the gender unicorn does with preschoolers. The gender unicorn makes children aware of LGBTQ+ and gender labels before they have even developed sexual feelings. Teachers are taught to encourage children to choose a gender before they even go through puberty. And now children throughout the country are being told that being a male or a female is not a gift from God.

Kinsey also contributed to the idea that sex is on a spectrum. He developed a measuring scale for sexual orientation called the Kinsey scale ranging from 0 to 6. Zero was heterosexual and six was homosexual. Kinsey believed that everyone had some homosexual desires within them. The idea that gender is on a spectrum has been normalized within our culture. You can be whatever you want, and the choices are no longer either male or female. According to a popular magazine there are twenty gender identities.¹² Here are a few of the options: genderqueer, bigender, demigender, polygender, pangender, omnigender, and two-spirit.

The activists who spread this propaganda are redefining reality. This has been encouraged by queer theory which is based upon the idea of challenging all norms of society. To do this they create new categories, new words, new realities that push back against anything considered ethical and godly. Queer theory introduced new pronouns such as ze/zir, xe/xem or fae/faer. These new labels give no indication of biological sex. And that is the objective. My prediction is that the next popular wave is going to be nonbinary. This will attempt to remove all indicators of biological sex.

Affirming Care Treatments

The standard of care for those with gender dysphoria is called affirming care. Affirming care does not challenge how a person feels, thinks, or behaves. A male who thinks he is gay will be affirmed and encouraged to pursue homosexual activities. A female who thinks she is really a man will be affirmed and encouraged to live as if she is a man. Those who refuse to affirm are labeled as haters and are often shunned.

Social Affirmation

There are three approaches of affirming care for transgender individuals. The first approach is social. During social affirmation people dress as the opposite sex. They engage in stereotypical activities normally associated with a particular sex. They use bathrooms that complement their gender rather than their biological sex. They change their name and ask people to use different pronouns. Girls will use binders to give the impression that they do not have the chest of a woman. Boys will practice tucking their genitals to give the impression they are more feminine.

Pharmaceutical Affirmation

The second approach is pharmaceutical. Keeping with the idea that children must be given the opportunity to choose their gender, puberty blockers are used to stop a

young person from going through puberty. The idea is that puberty needs to be put on pause until the person decides what gender they want to be. Often the impression is given that there is no danger for those who are given puberty blockers. Activists may tell you it is like turning on or off a light switch. However, they are ill-informed about the real dangers. Stopping the natural process of puberty has a negative impact upon the child. Side effects for puberty blockers may include mood changes, headaches, nervousness, anxiety, agitation, confusion, delusions, insomnia, depression.¹³ Puberty blockers can cause loss of bone density and osteoporosis in females.

It is essential to understand that puberty is not a disorder or an illness. Yet, when puberty blockers are used with adolescents puberty is treated as a disorder that needs medical intervention. Puberty is part of God's design as boys and girls become men and women.

When puberty is stopped, the natural process of developing physically into a man or a woman is interrupted. It prevents the brain from developing mature cognitive processes. The executive function in teen brains is not fully developed. That is why teenagers tend to make immature decisions. Often, they struggle to understand how their actions will have consequences. That is why in a rational world children are considered minors who need their parents to make decisions for them. Puberty helps the brain to develop so that a teenager will learn to regulate their emotions, control their impulsivity, and make good decisions. Puberty blockers prevent an adolescent from developing and maturing. When you stop puberty, you are cutting off their ability to mature as a man or woman. Those on puberty blockers become trapped in a world of fantasy and lies that will result in additional physical, mental, and spiritual issues.

Puberty blockers can lead to the use of cross-sex hormones. Nearly all on puberty blockers will use cross-sex hormones.¹⁴ For those promoting pharmaceutical affirmation, cross-sex hormone treatment is the most logical next step after puberty blockers.

Cross-hormone pharmaceuticals are taken to help a person's physical attributes align with their gender identity. A male is given estrogen to look more like a female. A female is given testosterone to look more like a male. Males who take cross hormones will have decreased muscle mass and strength, decreased sexual desire and sperm production. Often, they will struggle with erectile dysfunction, infertility, and have higher chances of stroke and artery diseases.¹⁵ For women who take cross hormones they can experience hair loss, deepening of the voice, high blood pressure, pelvic pain, and are four times more likely to have a heart attack.¹⁶ Taking cross-sex hormone drugs is a lifelong commitment to maintain the desired physical characteristics. While the concept is to improve the quality of life for nonconforming sexual individuals, there can be serious long-term complications.¹⁷

Surgical Affirmation

The third approach is surgical. Surgical affirmation seems to be the goal of those who

desire to identify as the opposite sex. Reassignment surgeries used to be a financial impossibility for most people. However, Planned Parenthood, insurance companies, crowdfunding platforms, and the government have made reassignment surgeries financially possible for many more people. The transgender community often talks about having top or bottom surgeries. The feminization of a man may include breast implants, removal of male genitalia, and constructing an orifice that reflects a female vagina. The masculinization of a woman may include removal of breasts and constructing a penis using skin from other parts of the body.

Surgical affirmation is cosmetic and does not change a person's biological make up. And it can cause a lot of confusion when a transgender person needs crisis medical care. Leonard Sax makes the case that being male or female is more than just how we look; it is how we are made biologically. Here are a few examples. Women have more cells in their olfactory structure (16.2 million) than men (9.2 million) and have a better sense of smell.¹⁸ Biological women can hear sounds eight decibels higher than men.¹⁹ Research has demonstrated that there are distinct differences between men and women. So why has there been a surge in transgender affirming treatments?

Influence of Social Media

One of the largest gender clinics in the world, London's Tavistock Gender Identity Disorder Services, when it opened in 1989 saw an average of fourteen youths a year who struggled with gender identity. By 2021 they were seeing over 3,000 youths a year with a waiting list.²⁰ Lisa Littman researched this phenomenon and came up with the term, *Rapid Onset Gender Dysphoria*. Over 58 percent of parents reported that their child became more inclined to participate in transgender feelings, thoughts, and behaviors after consuming transgender related social media and being surrounded by other transgender children. This is a perfect example of social contagion theory. You have heard that a virus is contagious. A virus can spread from one person to another through contact with the infected person's body fluids. Social contagion is similar in that feelings, ideas, and behaviors can spread from one person to the next like a biological virus.

Laughter is an example of social contagion. Laughing can take place without telling or hearing a joke. Just hearing others laugh can cause us to laugh. Like a virus, laughter can travel through a group of people. One person can have a significant impact upon another person. Like a domino effect the social emotion, idea, or behavior will spread like a virus. Lisa Littman's hypothesis is that transgender ideology has spread like a virus through social media.

Not only has the social contagion impacted our youth but also adult professionals. In the 1980s many in the mental health community were promoting the idea that people had repressed memories. Sigmund Freud claimed that childhood trauma could be repressed and have an unconscious impact upon the person later in

life.²¹ Many in the psychology community joined the cause and offered therapy that would help clients to uncover their repressed memories. Counselors were helping clients to remember how their family members sexually abused them. These victims would sue alleged perpetrators for events that took place twenty or forty years before. However, there is no credible empirical evidence that supports a therapeutic model of repressed memories. In most cases there are more plausible explanations.²² And in many cases a client had recounted a repressed memory of trauma which was a false memory.²³ Social contagion is real, and it is the reason many young people think that they are transgender.

Parents have also been swept away by the tide of sexual ideologies. Consider Jared Jennings whose name was changed to Jazz and became the showpiece for transgender affirming care. As young as two years old this biological male thought he was a girl and rejected everything that was male in him. Jazz became popular in the culture when he was interviewed in 2007 by Barbara Walters on the television program 20/20. Jazz took puberty blockers at the age of eleven, started cross-hormone treatment at the age of fourteen, and underwent gender affirming surgery in 2018. Jazz's mother was there every step of the way insisting that her child was a female. Jazz's mother was fearful that the reconstructed genitalia which replaced Jazz's male genitalia would close. To keep the wound open a dilator is used regularly. Jazz's mother was worried that Jazz may not be using the dilator and said, "I will be so mad if she goes away to college and that thing fills up. I will wring her neck."²⁴

The Threat of Suicide

Suicide must always be taken seriously. As Christians we value life and should not seek to destroy the life that God has given us. However, there are times when a person is so distraught that they may contemplate taking their own life. When anyone becomes aware of a person that is contemplating suicide, we should take every effort to care for them. The suicide crisis hotline is 988. Anyone can call this number at any time and be connected to a crisis counselor who will offer support.

However, suicide should never be used as a tool to threaten or scare parents who have a child that is transgender. Yet, affirming care activists have been doing just that. Parents who do not agree with LGBTQ+ ideology are told they need to affirm their child and not judge them. When the parents are unwilling to affirm the ungodly ideology, the professional activist will mention suicide and say to the parents, "Would you rather have a living son or a dead daughter?"

Parents feel they have no choice but to affirm the transgender process because they don't want their child to die from suicide. The phrase is emotional manipulation to promote an ideology that in most cases will bring more harm. We should not be promoting the idea that our youth need to embrace an ungodly ideology or die. What if we used suicide to get everything we wanted in life? Your son says, "Dad I want a new

sports car. You better get it for me, or I will commit suicide.” “Mom and Dad, I want to attend this ivy league university. You make it happen or else I will commit suicide.” We don’t affirm the use of suicide in other situations. Suicide should never be used as a threat to get what we want. And if a teenager made such threats about cars and universities, we would address the cognitive dissonance, their low emotional intelligence, or sinning against the fourth commandment rather than affirming the threat.

Many will give you the impression that if parents affirm transgender reassignment treatments the youth will be less suicidal. However, there is no substantial research that indicates that gender affirmation efforts reduce suicidal ideations after affirming treatment.²⁵

We should not encourage affirming care that will cause more issues and possibly more suicidal ideation afterwards. The question we should be asking is, what approach will protect the child and lessen the suicidal ideations? Suicide is complicated. People don’t commit suicide for just one reason. There are often many variables at play.²⁶ For example, ongoing research is indicating that many youth have co-occurring mental health disorders that might be a better explanation of the depression, anxiety, and stress related issues related to being transgender.

Co-occurring Mental Health Conditions

Co-occurring or comorbidity refers to the presence of two or more mental health conditions. You can be diagnosed with depression and substance abuse. Both diagnoses are appropriate, and the licensed professional will need to determine the proper treatment with both in mind. However, those in the psychological community acknowledge that there is a problem with false positives.²⁷ A comorbidity false positive takes place when a professional incorrectly diagnosis a second condition. This is called a false positive because symptoms are attributed to a second issue when those symptoms should really be attributed to the first issue. The feelings of depression, anxiety, suicide, sexual confusion, and fears related to one’s body are most likely symptoms of other mental health disorders. Too many mental health professionals are diagnosing people with gender dysphoria as a coping mechanism for symptoms that would better be addressed with a different diagnosis.²⁸

Instead of diagnosing someone with gender dysphoria it would be wise to consider the co-occurring issues that should be addressed first. In many transgender individuals there are other issues at play such as: autism spectrum disorder, anorexia and body dysmorphic disorder, obsessive compulsive disorder, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, and trauma.²⁹

Lisa Littman’s research showed that 62.5 percent of the parents reported that their child had one or more pre-existing mental health issues.³⁰ Co-occurring mental health issues are common. But it is concerning when these mental health issues are addressed by encouraging youth to be transgender. Becoming a transgender male or

female will clinically reduce the symptoms of autism, anorexia, obsessive compulsive or attention deficit, or trauma. In fact, more harm could come to a person by treating these mental health conditions with transgenderism.

Intersex Is Atypical

Disorders of sexual development are conditions where a person's reproductive organs and genitals are "mismatched" at birth. But the affirming LGBTQ+ community wants to see this condition more as one's identity rather than a disorder. The common term used today is intersex. Often people think that this term means that you are neither male nor female, but in most cases, determination can be made even if there are atypical features in sex chromosomes and reproductive organs. Some affirming activists want to make the case that there is a third gender.

I had the opportunity to make several presentations at the 2025 LCMS Youth Gathering on transgenderism. In every session the youth asked about intersex and were quick to quote the statistic that 1.7 percent to 2 percent of the population are intersex. This statistic is used to support an argument that transgenderism is a necessary treatment for those who are intersex.

However, the statistic is grossly enlarged to substantiate this talking point. Anne Fausto Sterling provided a definition of intersex in 1993. She said that intersex means that you have male chromosomes (XY) and female anatomy, female chromosomes (XX) with male anatomy, or a mix of the two such as XXXY (this is very rare). In 2000 Sterling provided a very different definition. She claimed that intersex is any person that departs from the platonic ideal of male and female. She claimed that 1.7 percent of people are intersex.³¹ Eighty percent of this 1.7 percent is a condition called late onset congenital adrenal hyperplasia, which does not meet the criteria that Sterling proposed in 1993. Congenital adrenal hyperplasia is a problem with an enzyme called 21 hydroxylase. Women tend to have bad acne or struggle to get pregnant. Sterling included this condition because she says they don't meet the perfect categories of male and female. Sterling expanded the definition of intersex which allowed the possibility for more people to fall within this new definition. This is not a new phenomenon in the medical or psychological world. When a definition is expanded to include more people, this is called diagnosis creep. Diagnosis creep expands the definition so that more people can be diagnosed, and more people can receive benefits. Leonard Sax has pushed back against Sterling and provides a more credible explanation of intersex and its prevalence within the population. Sax claims that 99.98 percent of humans are either male or female.³² Using his definition of intersex, only about 0.018 percent of the population should be diagnosed as intersex.

Sinful Spiral of Transgenderism

In all my years of counseling and conducting research I have observed that

there is a downward spiraling of sin that takes place. Understanding where the spiral originates and where it can lead provides guidance for spiritual care. Early interruption of the downward spiral will prevent the person from experiencing the devastation of rejecting God. There are four stages of the spiral that I will describe and provide insights about how to provide Godly guidance for those contemplating transgenderism.

Desiring

At the top of the spiral is desire. Christians desire many things that are not sinful. Ultimately, we should desire God. The psalms in various places encourage us to seek after or desire God. “O God, you are my God earnestly I seek you; my soul thirsts for you, my flesh faints for you as in a dry and weary land where there is no water” (Ps 63:1). “One thing have I asked of the Lord, that will I seek after: that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the Lord and to inquire in his temple” (Ps 27:4).

However, we can be tempted to sin by our own desires. James says, “But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death” (Jas 1:14–15).

At the desiring stage, a person will begin to contemplate feelings that are contrary to God’s word. This might be accelerated by social media and social contagion. At this stage, a person’s desires are far from being demands. Yet, the feelings they are desiring can become so intense that they are emotionally saturated with the longing to embrace how they feel.

At this stage, the church should provide catechetical instruction for parents and children of all ages. Pastors should preach sermons that clearly speak the truth of God’s word. A Seelsorger should practice compassionate active listening and prayer, and work to increase the faith intelligence of the person struggling with their feelings. Faith intelligence is trusting in the word of God knowing he created us, redeemed us, and sanctified us.³³ It is tempting to rely upon our feelings rather than God. But the Seelsorger encourages the troubled souls to look to God’s word for wisdom and direction rather than becoming lost in their own feelings.

However, the moment a person embraces their own emotional desires and rejects God’s will; they begin to spiral downward toward coveting.

Coveting

Coveting is when you desire something so much that it takes the place of God. A person in this stage embraces their feelings and begins to think about how to satisfy those feelings. Coveting is deciding that you are going to reject the gift of being a man or a woman. At this stage in the spiral a person actively embraces their own

feelings and thoughts rather than God's desire for their life.

Covetousness is idolatry. The person worships their feelings and thoughts of gender ideology and rejects God. The Large Catechism says:

Idolatry does not consist merely of erecting an image and praying to it, but it is primarily a matter of the heart, which fixes its gaze upon other things and seeks help and consolation from creatures, saints, or devils. It neither cares for God nor expects good things from him sufficiently to trust that he wants to help, nor does it believe that whatever good it encounters comes from God.³⁴

At this stage, the church should call the sinner to repentance. Dissatisfaction with the gifts of God will only lead the person to break other commandments. Paul says, "Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry" (Col 3:5). The psalmist laments "In the pride of his face the wicked does not seek him; all his thoughts are, there is no God" (Ps 10:4). "But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires" (Rom 13:14).

The Seelsorger will continue with compassionate active listening, prayer, and increasing the person's faith intelligence but should consider church discipline and applying the minor ban. The minor ban is used in pastoral care for congregational members who refuse to repent of sin. A person under the minor ban will not receive the Lord's Supper because they don't think they have sinned.³⁵ While the minor ban may feel like a punishment it is a loving response to those caught in sin. A Seelsorger will continue to walk along side of the person encouraging them to repent and turn away from sin. The parishioner that does not repent will slide further down the sin spiral.

Implementing

The person that refuses to repent and embraces their idolatry and coveting will naturally begin to act upon those ungodly feelings and thoughts. This is a pivotal stage of the spiral. No longer is gender ideology just a feeling or a thought it now becomes how they live out their life. In addition, their gender identity becomes public.

It is at this stage that the church needs to hold onto the truth of God's word rather than encourage the fantasy world of the gender affirming person. So how do you respond when the person wants you to use pronouns that don't match their biological sex? The critical question is, are you going to live in truth and reality or in a fantasy world? If you choose to use gender affirming pronouns you have decided to support their fantasy and ignore their biological reality. Which means that you are affirming their gender ideology rather than challenging it. What if they want you to call them by a different name that better reflects their gender identity? The same question should be asked, are you going to live in truth and reality or in a fantasy

world? We can faithfully say, “I am going to use your birth name. The name that was used in your baptism.”

Declining to affirm their way of life will be disappointing to them. As they plummet down into the last stage of the sin spiral, they will not only be rejecting God but rejecting anyone who will not affirm the fantasy of their new lifestyle.

Demanding

This is the most dangerous stage of the spiral. What began as a desire which they were exploring has now turned into a demand. They have created a new kingdom in the land of their minds. Only those who bow to their demands may be acknowledged. Those that will not abide by the rules of this new kingdom will be labeled as haters, dangerous, transphobic, and ignorant. Non-conforming parents, family, friends, and faithful Christians are shunned and banished from this new kingdom.

The church and Seelsorger have limited access to this new monarchy. But we should not stop speaking the voice of truth. From our various vocations we continue to speak and hope that God will use his word to breach the hard heart that once delighted in the forgiveness of Jesus Christ. And we hold on to the promises that:

As the rain and the snow came down from heaven and do not return there but water the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it. (Is 55:10–11)

Conclusion

Everyone you meet is someone who has been redeemed by the crucified and risen Christ. God “desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth” (1 Tm 2:4). This truth never changes but is the same yesterday, today, and forever (Heb 13:8). It is true that God created us male and female. We may seek to trust our own feelings over God’s word. We may sinfully reject God to establish our own kingdoms. But when we ignore God to embrace fantasy, we miss the opportunity to live according to God’s will and desire for our lives. Caring for gender affirming individuals will be challenging. But do not lose hope. Your faithful work is not in vain (1 Cor 15:58).

Lisa Littman has been conducting research with those who regret participating in affirming care (detransitioners). Her research has found that 80 percent had some regret about their decision to transition. Sixty-five percent indicated that if they knew then what they know now they would not have chosen to transition.³⁶ Social media has new voices speaking about their gender identity experience. These new voices no longer desire or demand gender affirmation.

How does the church set a place at the table for those who have been swept away by the fantasy of gender ideology? We continue to speak the truth of God's word with deep heartfelt compassion (σπλαγχνίζομαι)³⁷ into the lives of everyone we meet. Inviting them into the kingdom of God where there is forgiveness of sins and eternal life in the name of Jesus Christ.

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Women and Children and Abuse

Tiffany Manor



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Taylor has been falling asleep. After multiple occurrences throughout the school year Mrs. Schmidt, Trinity Lutheran's second grade teacher, asked, "What is making you so tired during school, Taylor?"

"Sometimes my house is loud at night. Last night my mom woke me up."

Mrs. Schmidt reached out to Taylor's parents and reminded them how important a good night's sleep is for students. But Taylor continued to drift off to sleep during class. Mr. and Mrs. Wilson, Taylor's parents didn't seem to be taking the teacher's encouragement to heart so Mrs. Schmidt mentioned this to Trinity's pastor asking if he could help this young family understand that they need to provide a supportive home environment for their child.

Pastor called the Wilsons and asked if he and Mrs. Schmidt could visit with them. Tom and Carrie Wilson came into the church office. They spent a few minutes discussing the concerns about Taylor falling asleep and missing important parts of class. During their brief time together, Pastor found it hard to read Carrie's expressions because of the sunglasses hiding her eyes. Tom did most of the talking and assured Pastor and Mrs. Schmidt that he makes sure that in his home his family does what is right.

Later that week Carrie Wilson let the school know that Taylor would be late because they were at the hospital getting a cast on a broken arm.

This story might not seem particularly worthy of mention in a *Concordia Journal* article. It is not a true series of events, and the names are made up. But this is an amalgamation of actual domestic violence situations experienced by LCMS church workers. Included in it are signs that knowledgeable church workers could discern as symptomatic of a potentially ominous problem in the home.

Introduction

Abuse takes many forms. At its heart, abuse is the inappropriate exertion of power and control to another person's detriment. It is a gross distortion of the love and care that ought to be extended through the vocations God has given. Abuse is a violation of the neighbor who is created and loved by God. Christ's body is called to extend care to people caught in abusive circumstances, sharing Christ's love and mercy, and proclaiming his healing gospel to those who suffer.

Most often when people hear the word "abuse" they think of physical abuse. Physical abuse is defined as harm to the body. It can involve neglect like withholding food, interfering with sleep or other necessary bodily functions, or damaging property. The other forms of abuse include emotional, sexual, financial, and even religious abuse.

In emotional abuse an abuser can be emotionally or behaviorally manipulative and controlling; intentionally humiliating, intimidating, or threatening; or isolate a victim from friends, family, or loved ones.¹ Sexual abuse includes lewd communication, sexual behaviors, touch, and acts. Sexual abuse is nonconsensual acts that could involving force or be unwanted, or with individuals who are not intellectually or developmentally able to understand sexual behavior or communication. Financial abuse could involve controlling and limiting assets or access to funds, jobs, as well as economic coercion and manipulation. Religious abuse can be a variety of actions such as not allowing someone to go to church, controlling spiritual activities, or misinterpreting scripture such as passages about submission or obedience.

The definition of abuse and description of its manifestation is worthy of more extensive treatment than allowed in this essay. Church workers are encouraged to learn more by consulting sources such as the LCMS Domestic Violence Task Force resources,² or secular institutions such as the National Domestic Violence Hotline, or Injury Center (United States Centers for Disease Control and Prevention National Center for Injury Prevention and Control).

Pastors, deaconesses, teachers, DCEs and other church workers may need to provide spiritual care to women and children suffering from abuse. Their response to these situations will be enhanced by learning and preparing ahead of time.³

Information and Equipping

Church workers should not be surprised by situations of domestic violence or abuse that may arise within their congregations and communities. Sin manifests in myriad ways and generational cycles of abuse have been occurring for millennia beginning in Genesis 4 with Cain and Abel. Abuse is not merely a psychological or social issue. It is sin against the victim and against God.

Estimates underscore the prevalence of abuse in the United States⁴. Data indicates that approximately:

- twelve million people are abused each year.
- nearly one in four women will experience partner abuse in her lifetime.
- one in three women experience intimate partner violence in their lifetime.
- one in four girls and one in thirteen boys are sexually abused during childhood.

Domestic violence occurs across every socio-economic and demographic group, often hidden beneath outward respectability. Many cases go unreported causing victims and survivors to suffer in silence, even within the church. Abusers are male and female.

Being equipped for abuse situations also includes church workers' understanding of civic responsibilities. Many professional church work roles qualify as mandatory reporters.⁵ There are variances as to what must be reported with some states requiring training on mandatory reporting.

Preparation also involves becoming familiar with local law enforcement, child protection agencies, and community resources. Building relationships in advance with community partners is essential and ensures that the appropriate referrals can be made promptly and safely. Church workers should research local offerings and create referral lists that are accessible to staff and volunteers. It is beneficial for church leaders to establish contact and develop interpersonal relationships with local community leaders in:

- Law enforcement and emergency services
- Human care agencies and social workers
- Shelters that accept women and children, protect their identities, and provide secure, confidential spaces
- Licensed counselors or therapists trained in trauma and abuse recovery
- Medical providers who serve people who face challenges with health insurance (such as providers who accept state health coverage plans)
- Food pantries and free clothing distribution centers
- Legal aid organizations
- Employment and housing services

Church workers must guard and steward their own well-being.

These relationships and collaborations allow the church to respond effectively in times of crisis and to provide a network of care to meet the needs of both body and soul.

Preparation also includes personal readiness. Providing care to those involved in abuse requires resilience. Church workers must guard and steward their own well-being. This includes cultivating a life of receptivity of the Means of Grace which provide forgiveness and strength for service to one's neighbor. Workers should be firmly grounded in the study and knowledge of Holy Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions. It is also necessary to have appropriate professional boundaries and have a system of professional support and accountability. Resilience is enhanced when individuals make wise choices about nutrition, physical activity, and rest.

A church worker's preparation requires theological, emotional, and practical readiness including being aware of the signs of abuse.

Awareness of Signs

Church workers must be attentive to the signs of abuse without presuming to act as investigators. Their vocation is to provide spiritual care, not to collect evidence. Growing in knowledge and discernment enables them to recognize suffering, make any necessary reports to civil authorities, and initiate spiritual care wisely.

Abuse often hides behind closed doors. Victims may conceal their emotional and physical pain because of fear, shame, or misplaced guilt. Common emotional and behavioral signs among victims include low self-esteem, anxiety, depression, and guilt over the abuser's behavior. They may mistakenly believe they caused the abuse or deserve it. Their fear and confusion can lead to denying that abuse is occurring. Chronic stress and adverse experiences may result in physical ailments or emotional and behavioral symptoms. Children may show signs such as sleep disturbance, poor nutrition, developmental delays, or social withdrawal.

Physical indicators may include unexplained bruises or injuries, or the use of clothing or accessories to hide marks. Abuse victims might be observed consistently wearing long sleeves in warm weather or applying excessive makeup. Neglect, itself a form of abuse, may appear with signs of inadequate hygiene, hunger, or lack of medical care.

Patterns in the abuser's behavior may also be telling even if they are not always immediately visible to external observers. These patterns can include jealousy, controlling behavior, blaming others, poor impulse control, paranoia, and extreme mood swings. Abusers may have experienced an abusive home in childhood, or in some other past relationship. At times abusers will display remorse afterwards, promising to change. "Honeymoon" periods may vary in length, with an abuser later returning to the same, or new, abusive behavior.

When the abusive signs are present, professional church workers should continue to foster a trusting relationship and seek out opportunities for discussion to comprehend if the woman or child is being harmed. It is important that a conversation occurs in a safe location where there is privacy. Complete confidentiality in a conversation should never be promised, instead church workers should assure the individual that safety is a high priority, and that additional help may be needed with appropriate privacy emphasized. Monitoring and moderating one's own emotional reaction is important; an emotional outburst could cause a victim to close up and stop sharing. Having a calm and emotionally stable presence will help to facilitate the suspected victim's confidence and willingness to disclose sensitive information. Gentle, open-ended, and nonjudgmental questions help the victim feel comfortable sharing. Church workers might ask:

"How does he/she act when he/she is angry?"

"How does he/she touch you when he/she is upset?"

"Has anyone ever hit or threatened you?"

If marital sexual abuse is suspected an appropriate question could ask about consent, such as saying "What happens when you say no to intimacy or sex?"

For children, additional questions could include:

"Is there something that makes you scared when you are at home?"

"Tell me about how you got this injury."

"Has someone touched you on parts of your body covered by a swimsuit?"

If a person discloses abuse, they must be believed and helped. Doubt or skepticism can deepen the victim's trauma and cause more harm. A compassionate response to hearing an individual is being abused, or experienced abuse in the past, will include actions such as referral to emergency services and community resources while being mindful of the victim or survivor's safety. Church workers should be prepared to continue walking with the person, providing ongoing Christian care and love as needed and appropriate.

*Nonjudgmental questions
help the victim feel
comfortable sharing.*

Prepare for Spiritual Caregiving

Providing spiritual care to victims and survivors of abuse is crucial and will likely need to continue with focused attention for many years as they recover. Sensitivity is

needed in providing spiritual care to victims living in abusive situations. Contacting a victim could endanger her. It is important to find safe ways to meet with victims. Once an abusive situation ends the survivor's needs and intensity of the situation will indicate the frequency and types of contact that are required. A team ministry approach can be beneficial, coordinating the care involving pastors and church workers in the auxiliary offices.

Professional church workers will approach spiritual care with an eye towards diagnosing the spiritual needs of the survivor. The identification of spiritual needs is developed through training and professional experience. The church worker seeks to discern both the emotional and spiritual state of the person, listening to identify the wounds of the soul that require the healing word of God and the sacraments.

Victims of abuse may experience a wide range of emotions and spiritual needs. They might be:

- Fearful of their abuser
- Afraid for the future
- Afraid of not being believed
- Denying the abuse to cope or survive
- Resentful towards the abuser
- Bitter towards those who failed to help
- Feeling shame
- Anger
- Despair
- Betrayal
- Think they are guilty or somehow caused the abuser's actions
- Feeling worthless or unlovable

There are many other reactions, feelings and needs that victims might articulate. The reactions and needs of victims who are currently experiencing abuse, or are in regular proximity to the abuser, may be quite different from abuse survivors whose experiences occurred in a more distant past.

Survivors may also express:

- Self-protective distance from other people
- A distorted view of family
- Anger toward God
- Questioning God's goodness or omniscience
- Difficulty seeing God as a loving Father, especially when earthly fathers or husbands have been abusive.

- A personal theology that confuses law with gospel and misunderstands the Fourth Commandment, Luther's Small Catechism Table of Duties, and scripture passages.

To make a spiritual care diagnosis, the church worker ought to listen more than speak. Empathy and active listening skills should be employed. Once the emotions and spiritual wounds are recognized, the church worker may begin sharing the love and mercy of Christ through spiritual care.

Providing Spiritual Care

Spiritual care to abuse victims and survivors conveys the gentle compassion of Christ. "A bruised reed he will not break, and a faintly burning wick he will not quench" (Is 42:3). Church workers are called to embody that gentleness, offering presence, prayer, and most importantly the life-giving gospel.

Components of spiritual care include:

1. Sharing the Gospel

Abuse victims and survivors need the pure gospel, God's promises, love, and hope in Christ's redemption. The gospel declares, "You are not worthless. You have inestimable value. You are redeemed by Christ." Jesus bore the victim's shame on the cross, exchanging it for a new identity as God's beloved child.

2. Compassionate Listening

Victims and survivors need to be heard fully, without judgment, explaining away their experience, or interruption. The use of active listening skills communicates that the person's pain matters and that God's people care. Acknowledging and validating their hurt conveys understanding and builds the relationship. The abuse survivor will welcome back an empathetic listener who can continue providing care, thus creating additional opportunity for healing in Christ Jesus.

3. Presence

Church workers should cultivate a personal physical presence that is calm and non-anxious. That enables the worker to provide reassurance and comfort, which will increase trust. A church worker does well to focus the victim on God's presence among them and throughout all the challenges. "The Lord is near to the brokenhearted and saves the crushed in spirit" (Psalm 34:18).

4. Means of Grace

Through the careful listening and observations while present with an abuse victim or survivor, the church worker will be able to discern the Means of Grace—Holy Scripture and the Sacraments—needed by the individual and make the appropriate arrangements for pastoral care.

Spiritual caregivers are particularly able to offer distinction between guilt and shame.

5. Prayer

Prayer articulates all the victim's needs to the triune God, petitions for God's provision, and entrusts the cares and concerns to the Lord. During a spiritual care visit the church worker will put into words what he or she has heard the victim share, adding prayers for protection,

healing, and the assurance of Christ's steadfast love. Prayer may also occur during telephone or video calls, and in written communication such as handwritten notes or digital writing—emails or text messages. Sensitivity must occur in communicating with victims living in ongoing abusive situations, more detail is provided below.

6. Initiated and Ongoing Care

Victims and survivors will need reminders of God's love for them in Christ. As mentioned previously arranging visits with a victim must prioritize her safety and not draw the ire of her abuser. The church worker should take the initiative to follow up with survivors, understanding that healing is a lengthy process. Church workers will need to be clear about their vocations and boundaries with the type and frequency of care provided. There is no specific number of visits that a church worker should offer to a survivor. What should be clear is that the visits are focused on matters of faith and Scripture. It is a true blessing when relationships are developed so that care can be coordinated with other professionals, particularly those who provide emotional and behavioral care like licensed mental health providers.

Spiritual care attends to the emotions of victims and survivors. Caregivers choose scripture passages and provide commentary and reflection that is related to the emotions a survivor is experiencing. Spiritual caregivers are particularly able to offer distinction between guilt and shame. Guilt is experienced after doing something sinful, while shame is a sense that one's very being is wrong or bad. Helping survivors to overcome any shame they might be feeling is accomplished by focusing them on their identity in Christ. Guilt is addressed through pastoral care that leads to repentance and forgiveness.

Cautionary recommendations

Church workers must exercise great care in navigating these sensitive situations. Several cautions are critical in preparing to provide spiritual care to women and children.

Privacy and Confidentiality

Privacy and confidentiality are distinct concepts. Privacy in spiritual care will include not being observed or disturbed by others. In contrast, people often think of or request confidentiality with an assumption that the information or situation will not be shared with anyone else. When it comes to abuse, privacy in conversations or sharing referrals must be maintained to protect and keep victims safe. Abusers sometimes stalk, search, and access private property and communications. They can become enraged and violent if the victim is perceived to be disclosing abuse or accessing help. A caregiver should never confront or approach an abuser and should reassure the victim that those actions will not be taken. Victims can be endangered if their privacy is not honored. Church workers must be cautious about phone calling, emailing, texting, or giving a victim print materials.

It is possible for church workers to confidentially receive advice from experts on abuse to provide support to an adult victim without sharing her identity or situation. The National Domestic Violence Hotline will consult with caregivers; the phone number is 1.800.799.SAFE (7233) or via text by typing the word “START” to the number 88788. These numbers may also be shared with victims, with sensitivity for her protection. There are times when abuse situations might require that the information be shared with others, particularly those involving children, or other circumstances when mandatory reporting laws require disclosure.

The National Domestic Violence Hotline phone number is 1.800.799.SAFE (7233) or via text by typing the word “START” to the number 88788.

Avoid Giving Directives

Spiritual caregivers must resist the urge to tell adult women what actions they should take regarding their abusive situation. Comments along the line of “You must leave” or “Stand up for yourself” should not be shared. Be empathetic and respectful, offering loving support. Provide information, allowing her to make informed decisions in the timing that is comfortable. Call the police immediately if violence is happening, or there is danger.

Relationship Challenges

Victims may return to abusive situations. This is often due to fear of the unknown, financial dependence, or emotional attachment. Church workers must not respond with frustration or condemnation but with patient compassion, recognizing the complexities and continue giving spiritual care.

The Role of Male Church Workers

For some victims, especially women who have suffered abuse by men, even the presence of a male including a trusted pastor may evoke fear. In such cases, it may be wise to involve a female spiritual care provider such as a deaconess or another trusted woman of faith, who accompanies the victim to pastoral care visits with the pastor.

Congregational Vulnerability

Some child abusers target churches as places where they may have easy access to children. This can be the result of overly trusting congregational members, or policies and practices that are lacking in training, security and appropriate controls and screening. Lutheran congregations are advised to provide child protection training, utilize background checks and the policy review services from specialized providers such as MinistrySafe and Protect My Ministry. The LCMS provides training for church leaders so they may grow in wisdom (Mt 10:16).

Challenges in Care and Counsel to Abusers

Providing spiritual care or counsel to both the abuser and the abused victim or survivor creates complications that must be avoided. Confronting a suspected abuser could even increase the danger to a victim. Couples counseling may serve to perpetuate abuse. Abusers should always be referred to professional specialists. Church workers in auxiliary offices should connect contrite abusers with a pastor for confession and absolution.

Congregations may face tough questions and decisions regarding the presence or membership of a known abuser, even if the abuser is repentant. Restrictions on participation in certain church activities may be necessary for abusers. Word and sacrament ministry and pastoral care for the abuser may best be provided in another congregation to prevent additional traumatization of victims and allow them to have a church home without fear. Church leaders must establish clear boundaries to protect victims and survivors.

Ministerial Vulnerability

Pastors and church workers are not immune to sin. Some have become abusers themselves. One type of abuse is engaging in inappropriate relationships or sexual misconduct with parishioners. When the abuser is a minister of the gospel the spiritual impact is greater and can ripple outwards to affect the congregation and wider church. Everything said in this essay applies with an additional caveat that a church worker's ecclesiastical supervisor, the District President, must be informed about ministerial abuse.

Referral and Support

Effective spiritual care also includes knowing when and where to refer. Abuse is complex, requiring multi-disciplinary professional expertise. Proper referral complements spiritual care and ensures whole person support. Referral must be done with the victim's safety prioritized. Help should be offered because it is likely that a victim will not ask. The discussion must include how to avoid jeopardizing or making her situation worse. Written materials could be found by an abuser thus endangering the victim. Borrowing someone else's computer or phone will be safer than using the victim's devices which might be tracked or monitored by her abuser. A church worker could offer to make a phone call on behalf of or with the victim, or to drive or accompany them to a shelter or emergency services. Referrals may include:

- Emergency services and law enforcement
- Local shelters and domestic violence advocates
- Licensed clinicians including psychologists, counselors, and social workers. It is wise to seek out those who are experienced in trauma-informed care.
- Medical professionals
- Legal and financial assistance providers
- Employment and job training organizations

The body of Christ plays a vital role in providing whole person support. Congregational members can provide practical help and a welcoming community. The church may also reduce stigma and judgment that surround abuse by raising awareness and confronting the secrecy and denial that can occur in communities. The LCMS Domestic Violence and Child Abuse Task Force recommended that congregations:

- Incorporate prayers for victims and survivors of abuse; for unrepentant abusers; and for professionals who work with victims, survivors, and abusers.
- List in your bulletin resources for those who suffer or who have suffered domestic abuse.
- Sermons can identify all violence, including against wives, as a sin.
- Incorporate domestic abuse as part of premarital counseling.
- Identify females in your church who could act as resources for victims and survivors.
- Educate church staff about domestic abuse.
- Correct misunderstandings of other church workers about the causes and effects of domestic abuse.⁶

A Lutheran congregation that is open about the reality and challenges of abuse and demonstrates Christ's mercy makes a positive impact on the entire community.

Ongoing pastoral care continues alongside the above support. The Means of Grace are crucial throughout life. The pastor administers the Sacraments and assures victims and survivors that healing is possible in Christ. He continually reinforces that identity is not defined by the abuse but through his or her adoption as a baptized child of God.

Scripture

God's word speaks directly to the pain of abuse and offers the only true source of comfort and healing. God is a Father who protects and defends the weak, and Christ is the bridegroom who loves his bride, the church, with sacrificial love that is far different from an abuser's distorted vocational power (Eph 5:25). The Psalms of Lament will be of particular benefit to victims of abuse. They are an invitation from the Lord for his people to bring their anguish to him and give voice to the survivor's suffering. "How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever?" (Ps 13:1).

Victims may raise difficult theological questions:

"Why did God allow this?"

"Was it my fault?"

"Where was God while I was being abused?"

"Does God still love me?"

"What does the Bible say about divorce?"

"Can I forgive my abuser?"

"Why do people in the church judge me?"

"How could my abuser claim to be a Christian?"

The wise church worker answers with patience and Scripture, pointing to the cross where God himself entered into suffering.

There are many scripture passages that may be shared with abuse survivors depending on the caregiver's diagnosis of needs. Church workers in the auxiliary offices are encouraged to consult and coordinate with a pastor to be sure that the gospel predominates. The LCMS Domestic Violence and Child Abuse Task Force include the below scriptures in the creation of a set of resources made freely available online at LCMS.org. These could be a starting place to consider the verses to read aloud to victims and survivors:

Psalms 6, 9, 13, 22, 23, 31, 46, 55, 56, 70, 71, 91, 116, 140

Ecclesiastes 3

Lamentations 3:22–26

Jeremiah 29:11
John 14:26–27; 16:33
Romans 8:26–39
2 Corinthians 5:17
1 Peter 2:19–24
1 Peter 3:18
1 Peter 5:6–7
Hebrews 4:14–16

Verses that provide assurance of peace and healing:

Revelation 21:4
Psalm 23:4; 147:3
Isaiah 40:1
Matthew 11:28
2 Corinthians 1:3

Special sensitivity and attention are needed in cases of religious abuse when an abuser misuses Scripture to chastise and justify abuse. Some abusive husbands distort and misinterpret the call to submission (Eph 5:22–23). True biblical headship mirrors Christ's self-giving, sacrificial love, it is not about domination. Abusive parents have at times justified their abuse using Scripture passages about honoring parents or obedience. This religious abuse is a grave sin.

Pastors and church workers in the auxiliary offices will need to walk with victims, patiently explaining the scripture passages that were distorted, properly distinguishing God's law and the gospel, and forming a true understanding of God's design for family and care of the neighbor. Luther's Small Catechism—the Explanation of the Fourth Commandment and the Table of Duties—will be of significant help. Likewise, the Large Catechism, Part 1, the Fourth Commandment (particularly paragraphs 167–178), provides understanding of godly authority in the home and community.

Repentance and Reconciliation

Forgiving an abuser is critical for survivors of abuse (Eph 4:31–32) but it may be a long path and will require counsel with a pastor. It is often not possible for survivors to forget abuse, although some very young children or people with certain medical diagnoses may do just that. Survivors should be assured that forgiveness is possible in Christ even though the terrible memories remain. Forgiveness of an abuser is made possible only because it flows from the forgiveness that each believer receives in Christ. With faithful spiritual care that is focused on the gospel, survivors may forgive their abusers and eventually come to a point where they can pray for their abusers (Mt 5:44; Lk 6:27–28).

Genuine repentance produces fruit consistent with faith.

Repentance that brings reconciliation with one's neighbor is central to Christian life, yet in cases of abuse, this must be approached with discernment and patience. Repentance and reconciliation are possible but cannot be rushed or

forced. Repentance is the work of the Holy Spirit, bringing sinners to contrition and faith in Christ's forgiveness. True and full Christian reconciliation cannot occur without genuine repentance on the abuser's part which includes demonstrable change in behavior over time, and the acceptance of accountability and the consequences. Church workers must be wary of the possibility of an abuser offering false assurances or being deceptive. Emotional remorse is not repentance. Genuine repentance produces fruit consistent with faith. Victims should not be required to seek in-person reconciliation with unrepentant abusers.

In situations of abuse reconciliation, when possible, is a long and uncertain process. Relationships may never return to what they once were, and life may never be what it was before the abuse began. Yet even when full reconciliation is not achieved, forgiveness in Christ offers peace and freedom from bondage to the past abuse.

Conclusion

The care of women and children who have suffered abuse is entrusted to Christ's church. The abuse of women and children is not a private matter; it is a spiritual and moral crisis that strikes at God's created order. The church must reject indifference and fear, standing firmly on the truth of God's word while extending the compassion of Christ. In every act of care, the church bears witness to the One who came "to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound" (Is 61:1).

Church workers are called to share his mercy, proclaiming the gospel that heals the broken and redeems sinners. To provide such care faithfully requires preparation, awareness, discernment, and reliance on the Lord's wisdom given through the Holy Spirit. May the triune God strengthen his servants to be wise, discerning, and compassionate in the care of all victims and survivors.

Endnotes

- 1 This essay will use the term “victim” to refer to someone currently being abused. The term “survivor” will be used to refer to someone who experienced abuse in the past.
- 2 LCMS resources <https://www.lcms.org/social-issues/domestic-violence> and National Domestic Violence Hotline <https://www.thehotline.org/> Injury Center <https://www.cdc.gov/injury/index.html>
- 3 Spiritual care of men who are abused and of abusers are equally important topics but beyond the scope of this essay.
- 4 National Domestic Violence Hotline <https://www.thehotline.org/stakeholders/domestic-violence-statistics/> accessed Nov. 13, 2025; National Children’s Alliance <https://www.nationalchildrensalliance.org/media-room/national-statistics-on-child-abuse/> accessed Nov. 13, 2025.
- 5 The Office of the Public Ministry’s Seal of the Confessional requires separate, and more extensive, treatment regarding abuse.
- 6 LCMS Domestic Violence and Child Abuse Task Force, “Identify, Understand, Intervene: Workshop on Domestic Violence and Child Abuse.”

When Marriage Breaks

Cheryl Thompson



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“Maggie, can you draw a picture of your family?” Maggie was a young elementary student who was better than average at drawing. She enjoyed drawing so when asked she got right to work. She drew her dad, stepmom and younger baby brother standing next to one another. Then she drew herself farther away from

them on the opposite side of the page. After carefully detailing each person, she took care and time to complete the last feature on each person: the eyes. Those standing close to each other all had blue eyes. She then drew her brown eyes. She was the only one in the picture with brown eyes. Wow! With that picture, Maggie helped everyone, including herself, see the impact of divorce and recognize where she stands in this changing family.

It can help to address the topic of divorce by looking through the eyes of the child/children of divorce. Maggie’s drawing helps the adults in her life gain compassion and empathy. Divorce is present in every congregation, affecting adults, children, and extended families. Pastors train for and focus on premarital and marital counseling but often overlook providing post-divorce care. However, pastors are called to shepherd those families, too. In this article, I will support that, encouraging them to address families fractured by divorce in three ways in their congregations: with grief care, faith growth, and renewing appreciation of marriage as God’s gift.

This article addresses families broken by divorce. The family struggling with high conflict pre divorce or those talking about divorce should be directed to those trained

Loss layers are complicated, and divorce affects each person in the family differently.

to help them, which can include both pastoral care and marriage counseling. It is good and important to note that pastoral care for people whose marriages are struggling involves calling them to repentance, working toward reconciliation, and sometimes dissolution of marriage amid betrayal, abuse, or abandonment by a spouse.

These are sensitive and important aspects of pastoral care. However, this article focuses on pastors and their congregations addressing families already divorced and ways to care for them after the divorce.

First, I will provide a description of the impact of divorce using the framework of the grief experience of divorced families and the grief care needed. Second, I will outline the faith education and growth opportunity for pastors and congregations to support these families. And third, I recommend for pastors to continue to uphold the value of marriage and renew this for divorced families, as well as the adults, the children and young adults affected.

Divorce as a Grief Experience

Recognizing the Layers of Loss

Divorced families experience many changes as the marriage ends. Fractured families experience initial grief with the announcement and then one parent or one parent with the children move into a new space to live. Two major changes happen at once: the ending of a marriage and the moving away of one part of the family. As the days go on several more layers of change bring further loss: The change in identity from that of husband and wife to ex-husband and ex-wife. The change for the children of seeing their parents together to only seeing them one at a time. The change of the children having to tell others where home is now. The likely change of increased working hours for both parents. Layers of change bring layers of loss. A loss of a church community is often on the list.

These loss layers are complicated, and divorce affects each person in the nuclear and extended family differently. Maggie, from our case above, is experiencing major changes. According to her drawing, she was processing a new reality. At her dad's house there was now a new stepmom and a new baby brother. She has little control over these changes. She loves to see the excitement of a new baby; however, she is now sharing her dad when visiting dad's house. When she comes to dad's house there is a new home which is set up mostly for these three other family members. They are there. But she is only a part-time participant. When she comes to Sunday School

or Vacation Bible School she may share about a new baby brother. Most people are excited and want Maggie to be excited. Adults around her want to help her adjust by being happy along with her. However, as her drawing reveals, they need to help her process the more subtle emotions that acknowledge that change brings some grief and that is okay. We do not need to accent the highs or the lows but rather allow both in a more natural manner.

Further, if we consider Maggie's father's grief experience, it becomes difficult for him to maintain the same relationship as before with Maggie. His responsibilities increase with a new and expanding family. From Maggie's mother's grief experience, she may be considering the sadness of her child's father having "moved on." Having a new wife and another child publicly impacts Maggie's mother and Maggie herself so other people's joy may limit one's expression of grief and lead them to suffer silently.

During this grief, a Sunday School teacher can give drawing opportunities and craft projects that allow for open-ended expression. For example, she could prompt the children with the following: Draw a picture of an event that happened this week; Draw a picture of your family at an event this week; Draw a time when you were sad; When you were happy, When you were angry. These activities can be tied into the Bible lesson for the day. Private prayer with children is helpful when you can validate an experience or feeling. You can assure them of God's love promised in their baptism as God's child. Give the child time to add to a prayer herself. The Sunday School teacher can encourage a parent by providing a time for prayer or asking a parent how they can pray for them. When the teacher is in a staff meeting it may be appropriate to pray for the family and share the family's needs with the pastor. Another important takeaway from Maggie's drawing is that play, and creative arts are natural ways for young children to express themselves and their emotions. Her participation in Sunday school and playing with other children can be normal ways she can express and process her grief emotions.

Emotions Surrounding Grief and Their Impact

Grief is an emotion many people recognize more when a death occurs, and open expressions are considered normal. But grief is often overlooked in post-divorced families. There is the end of a marriage and the loss of raising the children together through a lifelong marriage. There is grief at this loss. Like grief after a death, the emotions involved after divorce

look similar involving anger, denial, sadness, jealousy, and envy to name a few. These emotions impact people's physical, emotional, intellectual, financial, relational, vocational, and spiritual well-being.¹ Being proactive

Being proactive in looking for signs of grief can help pastors and those in the congregation provide care.

in looking for signs of grief can help pastors and those in the congregation provide care. For example, grief often impacts the physical body. This is true for divorce as well. A smell, a picture, a sound may trigger memories that hit the body and the body responds. For example, in the form of headaches, stomachaches or lethargic muscles. So often grief is unpredictable, yet keeping a keen awareness of the different emotions may help pastors and church workers proactively help families undergoing divorce.

They can also see signs of grief in behavior changes within the family. In addition to sickness young children may regress in behavior. They may exhibit an increase in tantrums, baby talk, or bedwetting. In school age children you may see a decline in grades, distraction at school, and conflict with peers. They may take on the responsibility of behaving well to get the family back together. They may be angry with one or both parents. They may worry and verbalize worry about the well-being of a parent when they aren't with them. Fear of abandonment. Teenagers may exhibit similar behaviors with added swings of depression or irritability and taking on risky behaviors to challenge the instability. Children in general are often confused, have divided loyalties and sometimes misplaced guilt. These emotions surrounding grief will depend on the level of conflict, their age and stability of other concerned role models in their life. But the grief and the emotions surrounding grief are there in various ways, and it's important for pastors to perceive this.

The parents also exhibit behavior changes. They can become isolated, withdrawn, less social as the social circles may have involved other couples and families. The finances changing add to an identity crisis. They may be worried about status if having to move to a neighborhood in a lower economic area. Women may seek a new job to provide certain economic needs. Budgets change. New monetary decisions where one household becomes two. Men may increase work hours or seek a new job as their identity changes, and they support multiple households. Spiritual care is self-care that tends to be left behind as work hours increase. God has wired men to want to provide for those they love. Continuing to increase work hours can get out of hand if spiritual care is put lower down on the list of priorities for the male or the female. Not having the role of husband or wife can skew the priorities to the children or to seeking these roles again in their future. Identity in Christ as modeled by those around them may keep them grounded.

Others in the extended family and the church family must navigate relationships amidst these behavioral changes. They will have to work hard not to take sides. Conversations around blame or justification of the divorce happen. It is difficult moving forward for parents to have a common focus on raising children. The parents who previously devoted time and focus on raising children together now seldom talk about the children beyond logistics. Conversations about the children and their future happen with the mother and father separately. Other adults, mentors, role models they are conversing with widen the circle. These may give support for the parents but may also confuse the children.

A Pastor's Role in Grief Care

A pastor may also be grieving. Grieving a lost or failed opportunity for reconciliation. Grieving the breaking of marriage vows and a family unit. Feeling like he failed them as a pastor. Prayers and continuing to lead them to Christ may be a helpful practice for him, as well as, for the members of this suffering family. How do pastors address the grieving while also building up their relationship in Christ? These acts of mercy are given through the word and sacrament ministry that pastors provide in congregations. Daily confession and absolution is good grief care as well as faith-strengthening care. Pastors can provide a place for lament. "The Lord is near to the brokenhearted and saves the crushed in spirit. Many are the afflictions of the righteous, but the Lord delivers him out of them all" (Ps 34:18–19). Pray the Psalms together. We often grieve without comfort from the gospel. The lament that has comfort provided by God's word is healthy grieving.

I often spoke the Psalms at the end of my sessions with clients. I often would focus on lament and comfort in Psalm 32 and will quote various verses throughout this article as an example of this lament and comfort care. Making a public verbal commitment and vow in front of friends and family is still regarded with high esteem and value. This is especially true among Christians. But in divorce, the shame and guilt from the broken vow can overtake your congregant. The beginning verses of Psalm 32 can help with promoting compassion with your divorced families. "Blessed is the one whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. Blessed is the one whose sin the Lord does not count against them and in whose spirit is no deceit" (Ps 32:1–2).

Daily confession and absolution is good grief care as well as faith-strengthening care.

Major life changes are accompanied by loss. It is true. When loss happens, grief is experienced. Focusing on mercy and grief care for the adults and the children is a way to provide initial help. The nature of divorce is the termination of vows and commitment made and breaking up the family unit. The separation of lives that were previously united. The church helps with practical small ways to provide food, rides, packing, and let family and pastors help with the details of their private difficulties and conflicts.

Our society doesn't promote asking for help or relying on others in times of stress. Some may ask, "How can I help?" But most will struggle to say, "Please help." It is hard to be the ones in need. The shame can be overwhelming. Pastors need to facilitate the church family offering help often and naturally when they learn of a divorce.

The family is often suffering in private a rollercoaster of emotions of grief as

outlined above. The marriage ending results in some form of these grief stages of denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance.² These stages and emotions experienced by the immediate family members impact them and the extended family in their spiritual, physical, emotional, relational, financial, vocational and intellectual ability.³ The church can address what is happening as they all grieve the loss. A meal train is often started for those with joyous changes, as well as those who are sick. Post divorce a quiet meal train can be organized to have people bring food or gift cards on one specific day and one person delivers those meals to a family after divorce. The pastor can set up a time to meet with the adults to ask what can be done to help with their grief. Do they need help with getting the kids places? Do they need help packing? It is the church's job and its members to be burdened in this way to help those in their midst. The practice of American individualism isn't found in God's word. Providing care and hope for those grieving loss is what it looks like to love our neighbors.

The legal process is necessary, but it can be intimidating and at times adversarial.

The pastor can refer the family to specific resources. Some congregations have Stephen Ministers who are trained lay people who work one-to-one with adults in need.⁴ This can be a valuable resource for adults after divorce. Individual care may be beneficial immediately when a divorce

has occurred. A pastor may also know of another divorced adult who can provide support in the initial aftermath.

Another specific referral that is available in some areas is DivorceCare groups.⁵ DivorceCare is a thirteen-week video-based program led by trained facilitators to help navigate the various decisions and changes that come with a divorce. The curriculum has a Christian foundation and offers groups for adults and for kids ages five through twelve. It provides purposeful ways to move through this major life change. Many emotions are addressed within a theological framework that gives comfort amidst practical resources and support from other Christians. DivorceCare groups work best after that initial shock. This typically means at least six months after the divorce.

Some pastors benefit from their own vetted list of Christian counselors to refer for professional services as needed. If not, he can check availability in his geographic area. Typically, a referral for professional counseling is applicable when the distress is impacting functioning in several areas of their life. For example, having trouble in their vocation, their physical health, their financial situation, spiritual health, and so on. These emotions and changes are negatively impacting functioning overall. Counseling provides objective support by someone who can help with practical solutions to regaining function and balance. Ideally counselors collaborate with pastors when given the opportunity by the client.

Regardless of families participation in these resources or referrals, ongoing congregational support and pastoral care is needed. The pastor has dealt with families in conflict and is trained to provide spiritual care in crises. Praying with the family can be comforting when anger and denial are being experienced. Encouraging divorced adults to trust valued church leaders and fellow congregation members for support is also the job of a pastor. Otherwise, adults working with lawyers may overly focus on the legal process, the division of assets, the custody and care of the children and not on the spiritual care for themselves and members of the family.

The legal process is necessary, but it can be intimidating and at times adversarial. This increases stress. The pastor focuses on spiritual care and health. Those families with high conflict going into divorce who end up in mediation need his help but may also benefit from DivorceCare groups and professional counseling. Offer several options, referrals, and resources. Taking initiative before and after a family participates in a group or other professional services is beneficial in continuing to provide soul care on a consistent basis. This ongoing support helps when unpredictable changes continue to happen. Not providing soul care during or after outside services may allow for unresolved grief to hinder the healing and may produce more guilt, shame and denial which further harms the fractured family unit.

Divorce as a Time for Education and Increasing Faith

Parents Are the Primary Faith Teachers for Their Children

Many life events affect a parent's ability to pass on the faith and have their children remain Christians for life. Divorce can hit parents hard in many ways, and they may not realize that they are still the primary influence on faith formation for their children. In a humble way knowing this can build them up after such a blow to their dreams for the future and for their children. Amid brokenness and sin, God still uses them to fulfill a significant calling for those they love.

The pastor is to continue to direct families to center their days on their identity in Christ. Direct them to attend Bible classes and Sunday School that focus on Christ's redemption. Help teach everyone to value God's plan for marriage while also valuing people in various family types, even where there is brokenness post-divorce. Do not move them to the back of the bus or treat them as second-class citizens. With few exceptions, they did not choose this rollercoaster ride and what it brings. This is especially true for the children. Whenever possible assume the positive; for example, that the parents didn't ultimately want the marriage to end. And overwhelmingly, children did not. Both parents will often verbally say they want the best for their children. They try to assure them that they will always love the children. They can only do that imperfectly. They always need Christ as their true redeemer, amid good and bad times. Pastors can give comfort through teaching God's consistent love. For

children, affirm their parents' role as their main teacher of the faith and that pastoral care involves the pastor guiding both parent and child. The pastor's main job is shepherding faith. Modeling this priority and extending it to the parents helps them to be equipped to fix or solve conflict that may continue post-divorce. A bonus that happens when parents accept shepherding care to pass on the faith to their children.

Discipleship Amid Pain

Divorce can be a time of faith renewal or faith skepticism for those involved. Post divorce care involves a pastor encouraging a renewal of or beginning of frequent spiritual practices in the home and partnering with the congregation.

Congregational ministry practices are already in place that the pastor leads that are very helpful for the family post-divorce. Confession and absolution take place weekly in the Divine Service. No sin is withheld forgiveness in these moments however many often think that God surely would not forgive this sin of divorce. A pastor may take the time to counsel a person individually for using corporate confession to think of specific sins. Especially those sins which are grieving them.

Private individual confession and absolution can be a great source of spiritual care. Share Psalm 32:3–5, “For when I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer. I acknowledged my sin to you, and I did not cover my iniquity; I said, ‘I will confess my transgressions to the Lord,’ and you forgave the iniquity of my sin.” What a comfort to someone going through divorce! The pastor helps them center their grief and healing in Christ.

Private confession and absolution aren't often a known resource. Pastors who provide it should educate their people on how it is used and when it is offered. Often the assumption is made that the sins confessed or discussions in the pastor's office or during private confession are confidential. Communicate confidentiality up front. Make this part of the education when discussing private confession. Let people know that what is talked about is confidential. Without this step, assumptions can lead to miscommunication and false assumptions of broken confidentiality. These can be devastating. The devil is working hard to build distrust with our called spiritual leaders. Therefore, do not assume that others know that what is shared is confidential whether in confession or just in meeting with a pastor. Speak it out loud and keep your word of confidentiality.

Confidentiality, in general, can lessen gossip among members and allow grief care to flourish. The practice of only sharing what is necessary with those asked to provide care is one way to model good care. Often, we as members and our pastors may hesitate to provide grief care until we see repentance and acknowledgement of sin. The pastor has the divine call and his own private prayers for this family as their pastor will help him in providing the care they need alongside the guidance that may

also be needed. Framing this in terms of grief care helps you to meet their needs and to assume the grief. Signs of grief may not be evident especially when in the shock of denial, of anger, or when acceptance has happened, or is

beginning to happen. Those who initiate divorce may have justified their actions long before any action is taken. They are often looking for a pastor to validate a decision of divorce. Validating a feeling of grief and showing care for a person is not validating the decisions made surrounding the grief.

As mentioned earlier divorce can be a time of faith renewal or faith skepticism. Education and growing faith happen while keeping in mind to be on the lookout for grief and meeting people where they are. Education and equipping parents to continue to be the faith leaders with their children is a challenging task with all families. Encourage parents to establish or continue with habits in the home that provide liturgies of faith formation. They may be at a good moment to hear something practical to do with their children that focuses them on Christ and his care at this difficult time. Family meals may be hard emotionally for one parent to continue without getting depressed. Encourage starting a new spiritual habit during the meal. Start a new habit of lighting candles for one meal a week. Playing a hymn after the meal before everyone cleans up the table. Everyone eats and doing it together builds the relationship in ways you can never predict. A pastor can share ways to easily access prayers, hymns and even short forms of liturgies using hymnals and technology. It is difficult to keep strong relationships with kids moving between two households, but not impossible. The pastor can give hope and encourage that God can bless them especially during difficult times. Continue to read God's word and pray with them. Continuing here with the example of Psalm 32:6–7, "Therefore let everyone who is godly offer prayer to you at a time when you may be found; surely in the rush of great waters, they shall not reach him. You are a hiding place for me; you preserve me from trouble; you surround me with shouts of deliverance."

Divorce can be a time of faith renewal or faith skepticism.

Helping Adults and Children Process and Grow Spiritually

The pastor can continue to orient them to spiritual care. That can be individual books or studies the pastor recommends, attending small groups or Bible classes and Sunday School for children. After a loss they need to be at the Savior's feet daily and receive word and sacrament regularly. Pray with them about their specific needs. Include teaching on Christian hope and the resurrection as ultimate restoration. Point to redeemed identity in Christ to give them comfort and security when earthly identity changes. Encouraging the parent to continue to work for good communication with

their child even when they are not present with them. Video calls can include prayers together and daily check-ins. If a child is too young to communicate well on the phone, a parent can make videos about their day and thoughts about their child, to share with them when they are older. With the pastor's emphasis on faith formation as a primary reason to be proactive in keeping the relationship strong, it may encourage a parent to seek guidance on ways to improve. Often parents get used to free weekends and become less proactive in communicating with their own children. And even less communication about the grief they are still experiencing. They are experiencing their own grief and when feeling better will want and encourage their child(ren) to feel better. They may not see that the changes they are navigating are also being navigated by their children only differently. Here Psalm 32 continues to be applicable, verse 8 comes to mind, "I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go; I will counsel you with my eye upon you."

Processing and Growing Spiritually with Teens

Maggie's family gives a good picture of young children post-divorce. Let us look at another family I worked with as a counselor in a Lutheran school. This divorce happened at a time when the children were teenagers and young adults. When post-divorce care involves helping teenagers process and grow spiritually it will be different than Maggie's care. Keeping in mind the behavior changes that may occur with teens as mentioned above let's take a closer look at Scott. Scott is thirteen and his parent's divorce was not what anyone wanted. But it was happening.

My client, Scott, is the youngest of three in his family. His oldest sister is a college graduate and recently married. His other sister is in high school. He and she have been the only two living at home since their parents separated. Mom is now working at a new job and moving forward with a divorce after a few years of counseling. Scott is irritable most days, not as interested in sports, and his grades are suffering. He is failing to complete homework. He will be turning fourteen soon and that has also been a subject of the divorce proceedings. Fourteen is the age in his state that a judge may hear his input on the care and custody agreement. Outwardly, he has had a more difficult time with the separation than his sisters.

Younger siblings who move together from house to house, can develop a stronger bond with one another than with either parent. However, Scott isn't driving yet. He and his sister don't often travel between the houses together because they are each busy with extra-curricular sports, general social activities, and church activities. He is often dependent on his parents for transportation, and his sister is driving herself and can therefore avoid the conflict that may arise between the parents about responsibilities involving Scott. The family has been faithful church members over

the years. Scott's dad is now attending another local church while he, his sister and mother still attend at the church where they are members. Scott has attended church with his dad on occasion and welcomes a time to worship away from those who know him. He knows that he doesn't like to be at his dad's apartment. And his dad doesn't really spend time with him. He may show up to one of his sports competitions but leaves without much more than saying hello to him. Scott's extended family is trying to love the children, too. However, relationships have suffered and continue to be awkward for everyone. It is a sad situation that has everyone not sure how to move forward in a healthy way. It can also be difficult for pastors and members to be objective when divorce involves friends. In this case study let us first focus on education for parents and teenagers as it involves stages of human development and faith formation.

Teenagers are in a physically changing state and their bodies are making the transition from a child to a young adult. During over two decades of work with children I often told parents that teenagers need their parents' time just as much now as they did when they were toddlers. But time is needed in a different way. A parent is there as a guide to help them in becoming independent. Parents allow them to make more decisions as appropriate while still giving input. The more time a parent spends with them the more they influence decisions made. Scott is still relying on his parents for transportation most of the time. A parent has a great opportunity to use that time to listen as he talks to friends, talks on the phone and as he does his homework. In doing this a parent is finding out about his world and able to talk to him in a way that he knows his mom or dad is listening. Teenagers need their parents' presence. Parents should take time to do physical activity with their teen. Schedule practice of a sport they love, hiking, or walking as they are natural environments for discussions. Having time during car rides and physical activity allows for connections. These connections build relationships and help with often the more difficult task of scheduling time needed for prayers and spiritual practices with their teens. Whenever possible they should continue with spiritual practices already established or begin new ones.

Teens may be difficult and rebellious for parents at a time of grief and transition making their presence and spiritual practices vital. Maggie and younger children in general can find life simpler at times of crisis because they are glad to have normal routines. Their childhood behaviors may be less disrupted. However, Scott as a teen is navigating changes in physical appearance, changes in his relationships with females, and gaining more responsibility while his parents are grieving, and the divorce is becoming public. So many changes happening at one time. The rollercoaster ride is daily, and the ups and downs can be jarring. Remember to be there and to listen as their pastor and to work with parents in addressing the grief and spiritual care needed.

Continuing to Value Marriage After Divorce

Research Validates Spiritual Care Need

Recent research indicates the importance of this work of spiritual care as it describes factors negatively affecting children of divorce. Andrew Johnston, Maggie Jones, and Nolan Pope examined data collected over several decades that linked tax and census records of five million children born between the years of 1988 and 1993. They outline objective data points to show the long-term impact on children of divorce, following the data from the time of divorce through their early thirties. It includes data points of the divorced parent's income, work hours, and location.⁶ It shows that typically the households are farther apart geographically in the ten years following the divorce. The children moved more often as the geographic spread indicates. The neighborhoods they live in typically are lower in economic value (than pre-divorce) and therefore may have less community resources. Following divorce mothers and fathers increase their work hours. This objective data helps us to understand

Pastors referring the families for care beyond what the church can provide is a form of spiritual care.

what is happening with these fractured families. Right away after divorce an 8 percent increase in weekly working hours for women and a 16 percent increase in working hours for men is reported. Mother's hours stabilize after a few years but often the father's hours continue to increase in the 10 years following divorce. The children move more often.⁷

Recalling the impact on my client Scott who didn't physically move and stayed in the same school. We can assume that children may have greater behavioral impacts when they move and then move again. The possibility of a different school and a new home which means leaving behind friends and neighbors. I was also struck by the increased work hours. It makes sense but it isn't something that I have seen researched. This research also looked at outcomes for siblings. Those exposed longer to the divorce being younger at the time of divorce as compared to those exposed less to divorce being older at the time of the divorce. Those younger at the time of divorce have increased child mortality rates, less income as adults, and lower rates of attending college.⁸ These negative research findings regarding divorce, call us to uphold marriage as a very good gift of God.

Seeing the need for intervening and ongoing care laid out in the first two sections of this article and lastly this recent research, pastors will benefit from having or establishing a vetted list of Christian counselors. As indicated earlier, pastors referring the families for care beyond what the church can provide is a form of spiritual care.

It does take time and effort to establish a referral list. One should also consult those on the vetted list each year for changes and additions. It is a best practice to provide more than one resource when asked for a counseling referral. Therefore, as one sees such strong negative impacts of divorce, pastoral care is a place to provide hope and help to families in need. Spiritual care need not be left behind at such crucial times.

Holding Fast to God's Design for Marriage

Another element of the education and equipping of the divorced parent is continuing the education on marriage. Pastors are proactive in talking about marriage, not only during catechism instruction, in sermons and Bible classes but purposefully with those who are divorced. If a parent of divorce wishes to instill a better idea of marriage for their children, then they will benefit to continue to learn about it themselves, just as adults continue to learn how to parent as the children age. Marriage has been established by God and is still a sacred union. Help them to see marriage as a good thing. Often others will provide advice on dating again; how, why, where, and when. Pastors are uniquely placed to speak to them about marriage in a new way they perhaps have not fully understood but may be ready to hear. Continue to talk about the sanctity of marriage in a way that is acknowledging the good pieces of their former marriage while also helping them to gain insight into the depth of what God's word says about marriage. When this education piece is missing, often adults will marry again with the same result as the first marriage even though they didn't see it coming and thought it was "different this time." Statistics that suggest this all-too-common result of a second failed marriage, should encourage those divorced to be more open to further instruction in a small group, a Bible class, or an individual class with the pastor on the topic of marriage.

Divorced adults gaining helpful insights into God's design for marriage is also helpful to their children. Some divorced adults date, are sexually active, and choose to live together but don't want to be married again. What message does that send to their children about marriage? The children are often going to follow their parent's example unless parents or other significant role models teach and model something different. Don't let divorce be the last word on marriage from a parent to their child. The devil is fooling people into thinking that not marrying, having open sexual relationships, and self-centered independence is a good thing. God's word and history teach us that this is not the case.

The importance of a pastor's calling can also be validated knowing that marriage is very important in teaching young Christian people. Education around the vows and commitment involved in marriage is where pastors have been trained to counsel during pre-marital pastoral care. Just as important are ongoing Bible classes and sermon series addressing the value of marriage. These tasks are not only addressing those in a time of pre marriage but those currently married at any stage. Addressing

and speaking about typical conflicts that arise in a marriage are important to send the message that marriage requires work. Further, they can show how marriage is to be valued in a way that people will want to do the work.

Conclusion: A Ministry of Hope

Pastors are called to lead God's people to daily repentance, to walk with Christ and to love their neighbor. Pastoral care after divorce is about leading people toward Christ's healing and hope. One's identity in Christ stands strong especially in times of loss. The pastor holds the hope and then extends that hope of healing and strengthening of faith.

Pastors can provide hope and see post-divorce ministry as part of their shepherding vocation of walking with God's people through valleys toward restoration. Providing practical help even when grief doesn't show outwardly. Validating grief and revisiting grief care throughout the years post-divorce. Pastors are uniquely placed to not only celebrate, educate and uplift marriage but do it alongside care for those traveling the difficult road of the brokenness of divorce.

Endnotes

- 1 The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, “The Wellness Wheel,” accessed November 30, 2025, <https://www.lcms.org/how-we-serve/mercy/church-worker-wellness>
- 2 Ellie Mental Health, “Examining the Grieving Stages of Divorce,” March 2, 2025, accessed Nov. 9, 2025, <https://elliementalhealth.com/divorce-and-the-five-stages-of-grief/>
- 3 LCMS, “The Wellness Wheel.”
- 4 Stephen Ministries, “What is a Stephen Minister?” accessed November 20, 2025, <https://www.stephen-ministries.org/stephenministry/default.cfm/1596?mnbsm=1>
- 5 Church Initiative, Sam Hodges, president, DivorceCare, accessed November 1, 2025, <https://www.divorcecare.org/>
- 6 Andrew C. Johnston, Maggie R. Jones, and Nolan G. Pope, “Divorce, Family Arrangements, and Children's Adult Outcomes,” Center for Economic Studies, CES 25–28, May 2025, <https://www2.census.gov/library/working-papers/2025/adrm/ces/CES-WP-25-28.pdf>
- 7 Johnston, Jones, and Pope, “Divorce, Family,” 46–47.
- 8 Johnston, Jones, and Pope, “Divorce, Family,” 48.

Homiletical Helps

Tangible: Theology Learned and Lived Holistic Wellness

Tangible: Theology Learned and Lived is a podcast produced by the department of Theological Research and Publications at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis. The following is a transcript of portions of the May 2025 episode “Holistic Wellness,” hosted by Jessica Bordeleau, with guests Dr. Rick Marrs and Dr. Timothy Saleska. The podcast can be found on our website, concordiatheology.org and on all major hosting apps.

Jessica Bordeleau:

Welcome to *Tangible: Theology Learned and Lived*. We’re exploring the ways in which theology permeates all aspects of life. Through conversations with faculty at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, we will challenge you to deepen your theology and live out your faith in Christ. I’m your producer and host, Jessica Bordeleau. I’ll talk with a variety of professors on a variety of topics, something different every episode. But it’s all pointing to the intersection of faith and daily life because it’s tangible, theology learned and lived.

Today we’re talking about the different aspects of holistic health in the life of a Christian. Here to tell us more is Dr. Rick Marrs. He brings together two areas of study that put him in a unique position of expertise. He has a Master of Divinity and has served as a pastor, but he also has a PhD in psychology and spent years working as a counselor and licensed psychologist. He is currently serving as the professor of practical theology here at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis. He authored the book *Making Christian Counseling More Christ Centered* along with numerous other Bible studies and training programs. Dr. Marrs, it’s great to have you back on the show.

Rick Marrs:

It's very good to be with you again, Jessica. Thank you.

Bordeleau: Dr. Marrs requested Dr. Tim Saleska as his conversation partner. Dr. Saleska is currently a professor of exegetical theology and the dean of ministerial formation here at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis. Dr. Saleska, welcome back to the show.

Tim Saleska:

Thanks, Jessica. It's a joy to be here.

Bordeleau: Dr. Marrs, I've heard you talk about the importance of holistic wellness, but I'd like to know more about what that means.

Marrs: It can mean a lot of different things. For me, it means not just focusing on who we are in our jobs, but who we are as people. Our emotions are interconnected with our lives. Our relationships are interconnected with our lives. Our human bodies are gifts that God has given us. People sort of ignore those aspects and get too involved in just the day-to-day work that they're doing.

Bordeleau: As Christians, we have the promise of an eternal, restored life with God. Why should we be so concerned about temporal wellbeing?

Marrs: Because God has gifted us with that right now! We as Lutherans tend to focus on Ephesians 2:8–9, where we read that we are saved by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone. We forget Ephesians 2:10, “For we are his workmanship created in Christ Jesus to do the good works that God has prepared in advance for us to do.” How can we use the bodies that he's given us, the emotions that he's given us, the intellect that he's given us, the finances that he's given us to holistically serve him in good works for our family and community?

Bordeleau: I've heard Christians be hesitant to trust psychology or counseling therapy because they feel it is worldly and has secular implications. Could a Christian trust something like this?

Marrs: I'm sometimes embarrassed by my former field of psychology. They've been misguided. Yet, to the degree that psychology is based in science, this is a first article issue. If somebody came into your office and said,

“Would you pray with me because I’ve got this pain in the upper left quadrant of my shoulder and my chest, and it’s running down my left arm?” you’d pray with him, but you’d do it while driving him to the emergency room! He might be having a heart attack. It would be improper pastoral care to say “Yes, come into my office and let’s only pray about this pain in your chest.” We need to make sure people’s bodies are cared for as well. That’s why we go to hospitals and doctors to be treated for diabetes or cancer or heart disease. There’s a whole host of mental and emotional health issues that also require professional help. When I think of holistic health, I think of helping a whole variety of people become more aware of what would make their lives healthier.

Bordeleau: Dr. Saleska, why is this issue important to you?

Saleska: The thing that saps the joy from people’s ministry and undercuts their ability to be effective as proclaimers of God’s word are not theological issues. It’s not theological issues that have torpedoed congregations and church workers; it is relational, spiritual, and personal formation. You hear of pastors or other church workers who are socially awkward. They can’t form a relationship. They don’t know how to lead. They have terrible time management. They don’t take care of themselves. It’s those kinds of things that put ministries in trouble. Our huge goal in the seminary is for our students: deaconess, teachers, and pastors to have ministries that are lifelong. Ministries that are filled with joy and positive relationships. This also affects the future. Will their children go into church work, for example? What kind of relationships will they have with their family? All these things are a lot more central to what we do as ministers than just cognitive learning and theological facts. Rick, you mentioned in your introduction that sometimes we forget that theology is a holistic aspect of our ministry. We are embodied creatures, as Rick said, and we live in relationship with other people. When people can’t navigate that, you can get into trouble quickly.

Marrs: Well, and even just the pain that we’ve seen with some of our graduates who left here at maybe a normal weight, and then we see them ten years later and they weigh a hundred pounds more. That’s going to have a big impact on their long-term health, their ability to do their job, and their vocation week after week after week. If they’re not taking care of themselves physically, it’s going to have an impact on their congregations. God forbid, those that have heart attacks when they’re 55-years-old. If

they had taken good care of their bodies maybe they could have served until they were 65, 70-years-old, or more.

Bordeleau: Dr. Marrs, you've had years of experience as a counselor. How did you see emotional health play into this?

Marrs: Well, this is our attempt to get at those circumstances before people would come for counseling. Everyone should go for counseling. It's a good, healthy thing, like going to the dentist twice a year. It's a good idea to go to a counselor once or twice a year instead of waiting until they're severely depressed. My PhD program was community psychology. It's an attempt to broadly educate the community about being healthier. It fits into my church work.

Bordeleau: So, if our listeners feel like they're pretty healthy, they're doing pretty well, why should they listen to the rest of this episode?

Marrs: Because we can always be a little healthier. They could identify one or two things that they'd like to do better six months from now, a year from now. They could seriously consider how they can address particular issues.

Saleska: Why should people listen to this episode if they think they're doing well? One of the things I've noticed about myself, and most students is that we do not have good self-awareness of what's going on in our lives. There are blind spots in our lives that only other people can show us.

A part of what we do in our formation groups is to develop a kind of self-awareness so that you don't just answer that things are "pretty good." When you ask other people how you're coming across or how you're being experienced, they might have a very different answer.

It can be shocking to find out that you have huge blind spots. Part of the reason for counseling, coaching, and the formation we do here at the seminary is to remove blind spots. You become willing to open yourself up, but also to be accountable to those you're closest to and those around you for a healthy ministry. I can't tell you how many times I've heard someone say, "oh yeah, I'm doing pretty good" and then you ask the people around them and learn that's not the case.

Bordeleau: What are the aspects of this kind of holistic health?

Marrs: There's a tool called the wellness wheel. It's a circular chart, kind of a pie chart, which highlights seven aspects of health. Spiritual health encompasses the wheel, with six other parts within it: relational wellbeing, emotional wellbeing, physical wellbeing, intellectual wellbeing, vocational, and financial wellbeing.

Saleska: The whole goal is to value each of these seven areas. When you value all these areas you start to figure out how to make some changes. The small step approach.

Bordeleau: Tell me more about what each part of the chart means. What is relational health?

Marrs: Relational health is taking care of relationships. How would my family perceive me? What would they say about our relationship? Would they suggest something to work on? Relational and emotional health are highly intertwined. How can we deal with our own fears, anxieties, angst, or sadness? Vocational health is also kind of intertwined; we have different vocations or callings in life that God has given us. The other three parts of the chart are important as well: intellectual health, physical health, and financial health.

Bordeleau: Based on this pie chart, the overarching aspect of health that oversees all the other ones is spiritual health. It defines our identity as a baptized child of God. Wouldn't pastors and teachers already be spiritually healthy? They talk about God on a regular basis, pray with others, teach Sunday school. How could you not be spiritually healthy when you are spiritually caring for people?

Saleska: You can be very adept cognitively and intellectually, but if you are not being nourished and enriched by the gospel, you feel like you're starving spiritually. I think that that can happen very easily.

Your vocation isn't just an intellectual activity in which you deliver nuggets of truth or doctrinal information for people. Rather, the callings for church workers are highly relational. If you don't value your relationships with those closest to you and those to whom you're ministering, how are you going to thrive?

Marrs: These things change over our lifetimes. Like financial health: a young person might have the goal of paying down their student loans or credit card, so they're not encumbered with debt. For those in their late thirties, it might be life insurance or a will. Things change in our relational health and vocational health. Our relationship with our parents is different when we're in our teens versus when we're in our sixties. Our relationship with our siblings is different at different ages. How can we be vocationally healthy in all the various callings that we have in our lives?

Saleska: I always tell students to start with small things to integrate into their life. Let's say you don't like how you're eating. It's not more time consuming to make different choices; the changes come internally. The question is: how do I start to value my physical health?

The same thing with relationships. We're relational beings. How do I start to value that? We shouldn't think of it as something we have to do in addition to everything else, rather this is what we do as human beings. We have relationships; it's a life-long thing. If we make the mistake of always thinking we're just piling on extra stuff, then we're going to think of it as law. We are a *grace*-centered people. God has given us these gifts. How do we start to value them in our daily lives? How can we thrive spiritually? Whether you're in church work or not, we are a people who are gospel-centered in a true sense. It's not just an idea; it's a lived truth. We believe that the gospel not only assures people of their forgiveness from God, but it works. It's God's effect in people.

If a person is law-centered or judgment-centered, they're not going to be spiritually healthy. They're going to have trouble with their relationships. If they're gospel-centered they lead with the forgiveness of sins, the ability to accept forgiveness, give forgiveness, and minister from that point of grace. All these other things start to fall into place.

We make a mistake to think of these things as something from the outside that needs to come into us. We are relational beings. We're emotional beings. We are physical beings. We are intellectual beings. We are people who work in the world. This is who we are as human beings. When you start to think of these things as coming from the inside, you can think of them in a more integrated way. God has given us these gifts. How do we start to value them in our daily lives?

Bordeleau: Okay. You convinced me. I could use a Bible study on this topic! Dr. Marrs, tell me about the one you wrote.

Marrs: About a year ago, I was contacted by *LookUp Indiana*, an initiative from the Lutheran Foundation in Indiana. They are funding initiatives for faith, wellness, and mental health. After speaking at their conference, they wanted a Bible study about the wholeness wheel for lay people. At that point, it had only been directed at church workers. So, for the last nine months or so, I've been working on this Bible study. It was published by the *Lutheran Foundation of Indiana* in May 2025. It is available completely free on their website: <https://lookupindiana.org/>. They've got scads of things that are helpful on health and wellness, as well as faith and mental health issues. That's what they're about.

Bordeleau: Tell me more about the structure of the resource you wrote.

Marrs: There are eight different lessons: an introductory chapter, and then seven chapters about the seven areas of health. I didn't incorporate a lot of personal development plans, but there's a little bit of that at the end. I want to encourage people to change their lives in little ways, actively doing something to be healthier in each one of these areas. The study gives scriptural connections to biblical teachings.

The Bible study has a leader's guide so pastors, DCEs (Directors of Christian Education) or other church workers download it with their lay people. If lay people are listening to this episode, they can suggest this to their pastor. They don't have to pay anything to download the resource. I was pleasantly surprised when the Lutheran Foundation said they are making this available to everybody, completely free of charge.

Bordeleau: I could see this being helpful for teenagers as well. As a youth leader, I was always looking for quality curricula like this. Teens are at a stage when they are forming life-long habits. This Bible study would guide them to make healthy choices for their own well-being.

Marrs: The prayers at the beginning and end of the Bible studies are based on the collect of the fifth Sunday of Easter. It goes like this, *oh God, you make the mind of your faithful to be of one will grant that we may love what you have commanded and desire what you promise, that among the many changes of this world, our hearts may be fixed. Where true joys are found*

through Jesus Christ, your Son, our Lord. I love that phrase: *love what you have commanded and desire what you promised.* It's healthy for us to do what God has commanded us in the Ten Commandments, but to desire what God has promised to us, the forgiveness, new life, and honor that we have as called children of God. That overwhelms our life, if we realize it. It's a positive, overwhelming hope to desire what he promised. Then our hearts will be fixed where true joys are found. We get to participate in Jesus's story here on earth.

Bordeleau: The final question on the show is always this: What do you want listeners to remember?

Saleska: I want listeners to remember that even though we are new creatures in Christ, we're still sinners. The grace-centered part of that is realizing that we can forgive ourselves too. Rather than thinking about these things as assignments, we think of them as aspects of our lives that we value. Some nights you might go to bed thinking about how you failed miserably in a conversation you had with your wife. You can receive that forgiveness and then engage in conversations with your wife or your children. You can lead into conversations of mutual forgiveness, repentance, and renewal. It's the recognition that we are continually going to fail in all kinds of aspects of our lives, but to remember God's grace means that we're forgiven. We can admit our wrongs to each other, engage in the activities of forgiveness and forgiving each other. We can renew our lives in a healthy way, with all these aspects of health. That's probably the one thing that I'd like listeners to take away.

Bordeleau: Dr. Marrs what do you want our listeners to remember?

Marrs: I remember where I got started with all this. It was from one generation that shared this gospel with the next generation. It was from Tim's father, John Saleska. He was my first psychology professor and Old Testament professor at St. John's College in Winfield, Kansas. I first became interested in how to help people holistically: psychologically and spiritually. It was almost fifty years ago. It gets back to that phrase: *that we may love what he has commanded and desire what he promises.* If we can find balance in those things! He's given us all these wonderful gifts. He's guided us towards his law so that we realize our need for our savior, but he's given us the promises that he is going to save us in Jesus Christ. The wholeness wheel is a tool that can help us live out balanced lives in

Christ. I just hope that people will use this Bible study and that it would be beneficial to the church.

Bordeleau: Dr. Marrs and Dr. Saleska, thank you for being on the show!

Saleska: You're most welcome.

Marrs: Thank you very much for having us, Jessica.

Bordeleau: Join me next time when we talk about the intersection of theology and daily life, because it's tangible, theology is learned and lived.

You can find more episodes of Tangible: Theology Learned and Lived on all major hosting apps and on our website, concordiatheology.org. New episodes are released on the fifteenth and thirtieth of each month.

Reviews

Reviews

EMOTIONS & THE GOSPEL: Created for Connection. By Heidi Goehmann. Concordia Publishing House, 2022. Paperback. 182 pgs. \$17.99.

“If God welcomes emotions to be part of our lives, including our spiritual lives, but also doesn’t want them to be gauges to determine His presence and constancy, what then do we teach about emotions as a church?” (10).

Goehmann’s mental health training, theological education, and many years of professional experience beautifully inform this book. Weaving in her stories of emotions from an early age and how they impacted relationships with others gives permission to look at our own stories and histories to help us reflect on our emotions.

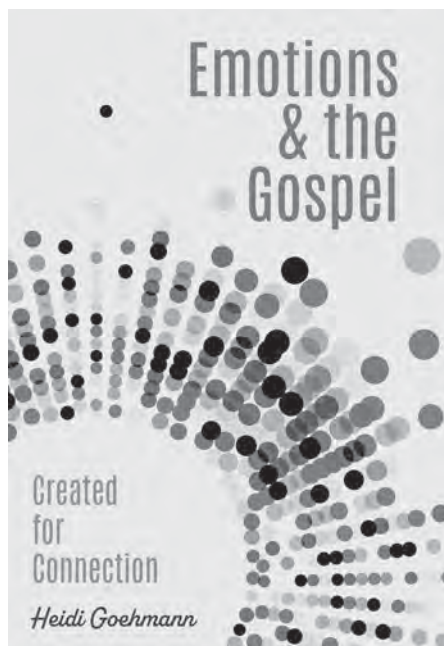
The book has four parts: Beliefs about Emotions, Misconceptions about Emotions, Ways to Process Emotions, and Specific Emotions.

In part one she defines our emotions as part of being God’s human creatures. She explores the image of God and the ways human emotions reflect God’s design. Acknowledging emotions are affected by sin and often processed or

projected in unhealthy ways, she directs the reader to the redemption found in the gospel to serve emotional wellness. As new creatures in Christ, we are joyously free to embrace emotions that arise out of his promise in baptism. This helps address questions like: What part do emotions play in loving my neighbor? How might they bridge gaps between people in this broken world?

After acknowledging emotions are complex, part two then examines myths

and common negative views of emotions. It answers questions like the one posed at the top of this review. Often myths and negative views have partial truths within them. Partial truths of emotions is the framework among the topics covered, two of which are Unified Facial Response and



Regulation. This section helps make distinctions between what is true and not true in reflecting on God’s gift of emotions. Truths and stability are found when we turn to God’s word. Goehmann writes, “Through His Word, we can

distinguish God from the world, truth from confusion, grace from the voice of our inner critic” (37).

Part three gives four biblical ways to process and express emotions: She writes that the “four tools I offer in this section are ways people consistently process their emotions before God in the Bible. Throughout Scripture, we see these four tools for emotional processing: contemplation, articulation, exploration and connection” (70–72). She invites us to consider these tools as a way to process using a realistic lens and a bit of distance. Her “connection” tool also emphasizes our created need for one another and helps address the tendency to be self-centered.

In part four Goehmann goes deeper into several specific emotions identified in the Bible that can help increase emotional intelligence. Specific emotions she explores are indignation, contempt, perplexity, weariness, and distress. Delight and felt compassion are also explored. Goehmann uses helpful biblical references showing that God created and values each emotion. She does not compare right or wrong, negative or positive, but simply conveys the richness of being in Christ as new creatures with emotions to share, express, and process.

Goehmann enlightens us on specific emotions using a description from the biblical narrative. From Scripture she talks about each emotion in detail, distinguishing it from others for clarity. Her precise and varied vocabulary in expressing and processing interactions with others is very engaging. An example of this is her exploration of perplexity and contempt.

She describes perplexity in relation to confusion. Confusion is an emotional experience that begs one to clarify thinking. However, when clarity doesn’t come, perplexity ensues. This is more complex. When experiencing perplexity, through ‘connection’ we can endure perplexity together to find resolution. She writes, “We handle the emotional experience of perplexity better in relationship, where your piece of the understanding puzzle is different from mine and the pieces were made to fit together” (157). We can increase our vocabulary. This can enrich our relationships with others and help us see the awe and wonder of our connections with one another in Christ.

Goehmann also gives insight into the challenging emotion of contempt. Small nonverbal gestures such as eye rolling can harm relationships. She warns against normalizing and passing these off as trivial. Noticing the nonverbal gestures, the tone of voice, and other behaviors can help identify and constructively address certain expressions of contempt.

Finally, a practical feature she includes is summary bullet points at the end of each section to call attention to the main points, and discussion questions at the end of the book for use in a small group study. She also provides a list of emotions found in Scripture that can be explored with her four tools—contemplation, articulation, exploration, and connection.

In short, Heidi Goehmann lays a foundation for talking about, processing,

and regulating emotion. Her work increases one's emotional vocabulary, rooting it in the gospel, with discernment through the law. The book's articulation of emotions will surely enrich and increase connections and relationships for those who apply its learning.

*Cheryl Thompson
Licensed Professional Counselor
St. Louis, Missouri*

THE BOOK OF ACTS AS STORY: A Narrative-Critical Study. By David R. Bauer. Baker Academic, 2021. Paperback. 304 pages. \$32.99.

David Bauer offers here a readable walkthrough of the book of Acts, focusing on the book's narrative and theological dynamics. His approach to Acts is extremely valuable since the lion's share of scholarly writing on Acts, whether historical-critical or not, is primarily interested in Acts as a window into the history that stands behind the text. Instead, Bauer approaches the book as a narrative. This in no way denies that Acts testifies to real events in history. Rather, it assumes that the theological meaning of the book is best found by paying attention to the dynamics of the story that Luke tells through Acts. Accordingly, this book is different from a commentary in that most commentaries are reference works which guide readers through the arcane details of scholarly fights, tricky syntax, and difficult historical questions. Instead, this book is a rather different kind of commentary

which seems less interested in solving the problems of the text than in drawing readers' attention to the larger patterns of the story that a more detail-oriented approach tends to overlook.

The first three chapters of the book discuss biblical narrative theory and its application to the book of Acts. Bauer successfully introduces readers to a well-developed, yet accessible approach to narrative criticism. Perhaps one of the most helpful parts of this section is the way that Bauer introduces readers to the different questions they can ask of Acts. For example, when discussing the role of setting, Bauer shows how a setting is not merely about where events take place but can also have a symbolic function as well, as Rome and Jerusalem certainly do in Acts. Bauer's book excels at helping readers not by giving them factoids about grammar and historical context or adjudicating the interpretation of disputed passages, but by giving readers the tools they need to be insightful readers of Acts.

The final three-quarters of the book walk through the narrative of Acts. In my estimation, Bauer manages to find the right balance between focusing on key details and keeping the larger picture in mind. Bauer hardly discusses every debated issue in Acts. Bauer, however, manages to slow down the story just enough to help readers appreciate the literary and theological artistry of Luke's account without losing the overall movement of the narrative. This is the kind of treatment of a biblical book that will make readers want to go back and

re-read Acts to see for themselves what Bauer has shown them. For example, Bauer helpfully emphasizes how the speeches of Acts are best understood as small narratives themselves.

The speeches, regardless of the speaker or the context, are concerned to tell the story of what God has done through Jesus. Yet the speeches also do so in response to different situations and accordingly have different purposes as they expound God's acts in history.

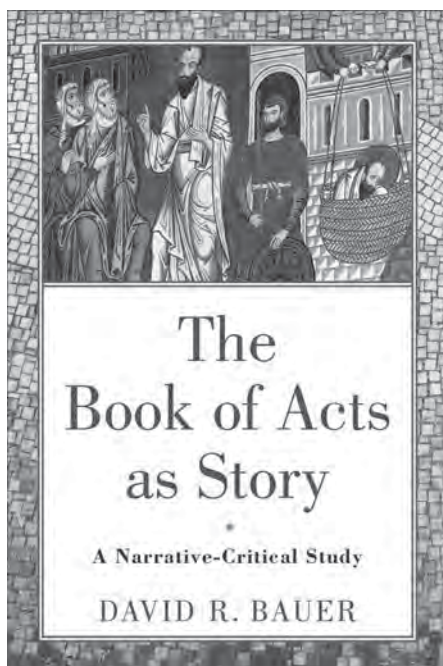
One particularly helpful insight is Bauer's emphasis on how the story of Acts develops. For example, one of the key developments in Acts is the integration of Gentiles into the church. Bauer points out how in some of the early speeches of Acts, Peter does not seem to anticipate this development, yet the words he quotes from Joel during his Pentecost speech nevertheless hint toward this development in interesting ways (89–90). Thus, when God later reveals to Peter that there can be no barriers between

Jewish and Gentile believers (Acts 10), Peter is able to realize why this must be so as an implication of the apostles' very preaching and mission work. Bauer

helpfully draws out the implications of this when he writes, "The Church, then, in the person of Peter, is interpreting this new situation of mission by drawing implications from its own kerygma. This is the Church's theological method" (157).

My disagreements with this book are rather minor. For example, I have a few small misgivings about Bauer's application of narrative theory. Bauer, for example, puts a bit too much emphasis on correctly outlining

the narrative than I think is helpful. He also overdetermines the identity of the implied readers when he speculates about whether the implied readers are Jewish or Gentile (34). This strikes me as a category error since when most narrative critics talk about implied readers, they are referring to readers who are necessarily imaginary and therefore do not have an ethnicity. Occasionally Bauer is also guilty of over-reading the text, such as when he suggests that the use of the term "Christians" in Acts 11:26 indicates that



the church had sufficiently distinguished itself from Judaism. The mere use of the label “Christian” does not indicate this any more than the labels “Pharisee” or “Sadducee” indicate that these groups were distinct from first-century Judaism.

Nevertheless, this book successfully helps readers think of Acts not as a disconnected set of stories and speeches but as an integrated narrative. When many Christians engage with scripture, it is easy for us to think only at the level of the verse or perhaps the pericope. Bauer helpfully encourages readers to think at the level of larger narrative movements and ask insightful questions that might not otherwise arise if we do not learn to look at the bigger picture.

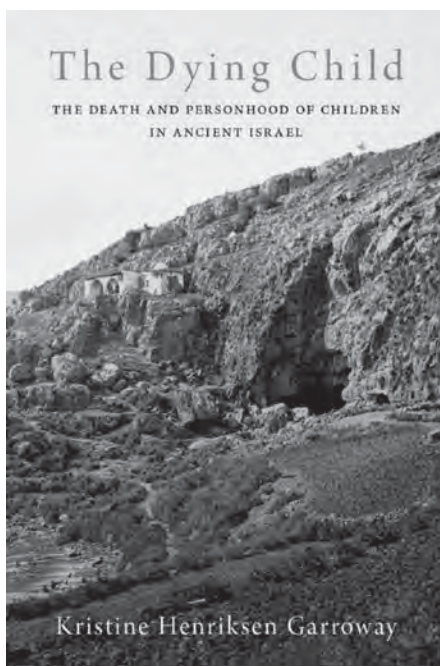
I commend this book especially to any pastors who desire to lead a Bible study on the book of Acts. Bauer’s careful and thoughtful work helps one avoid losing the forest for the trees.

Kendall A. Davis
Concordia University, St. Paul

THE DYING CHILD: The Death and Personhood of Children in Ancient Israel. By Kristine Henriksen Garroway. Oxford University Press, 2025. Hardcover. 216 pages. \$99.00.

Dr. Kristine Garroway offers an insightful study that brings two distinct fields of study into conversation. The first voice in the conversation is that of archaeology. While there has been much work regarding the archaeological burial records of the biblical era, Garroway gives

attention to the archaeological record of infant and child burials which has not received significant attention previously. The first part of the book delves into the archaeological record of child burials in the Bronze and Iron Ages in general (ca. 3700–700 BC), Iron Age (ca. 1200–520 BC) infant and child burials on the Philistine Coast, Iron Age (ca. 1200–520 BC) infant and child burials in Phoenician-influenced areas, Iron I (ca. 1200–980 BC) infant and child burials in Israel, and Iron II (ca. 980–700 BC) infant and child burials in Judah and Israel. It is helpful that Garroway discusses the record in Israel and Judah to the end of the first part of her work as it allows the reader to note distinctive differences between Israelite/Judean



practices and those of their neighbors.

The second voice in the conversation is the relatively new field of personhood which is the focus of the second part of this study. The archaeological record set forth in the first part of the book is utilized to evaluate the extent to which infants and children were seen as persons bearing equivalent or partial value as adults. To that end, Garroway focuses upon how the deceased were memorialized, the means of their inclusion within family tombs, evidence of child sacrifice, and the varying methods of burying persons found within differing peoples. This second part of the book offers the most opportunity for fresh insight and thus also the greatest occasion for critiquing Garroway's conclusions. While the reader may believe the report of the archaeological record in the first part of the book could be better presented to minimize the reader's (or author's) prejudice, it is largely a report of data. The second part of the book gets to the debatable matter of "What does this mean?"

The following observations offer both this reviewer's appreciation for the insights set forth in part two of the book as well as the reviewer's critique of part two. A genuinely helpful insight is Garroway's discussion of the regular practice of jar burials that was found throughout varying peoples. A contrasting practice is found within Israel/Judah where burials were often not in jars but upon flat surfaces resembling beds. Garroway discusses how jar burials (used no matter the age of the deceased)

were indicative of a belief in rebirth as the deceased was in a fetal position in a womb-like jar. Garroway further argues that the Israelite/Judean practice of persons being buried upon "beds" indicates a belief in the deceased awaiting their awakening. The reviewer could not help but go beyond the book's discussion to consider how this correlates with the biblical hope of the resurrection which finds expression in the language of death as sleep.

As noted above, the second part of the book does consider the ancient practice of child sacrifice. Garroway is measured in treating that topic with limited attention to the biblical record on the matter. On one hand, the book is being true to its focus upon a conversation between archaeology and personhood. On the other hand, that conversation would be strongly enhanced by bringing the biblical record into the conversation.

This engaging book will find its primary readership among academics. It is not geared toward congregational usage, though its insights can be utilized by pastors and laity for a better understanding of burial practices in the biblical world and what it reveals of the values and beliefs of the peoples of the biblical world. A university or seminary course on biblical archaeology could utilize this text for a unit of the course or for a student's project within that course.

Kevin Golden

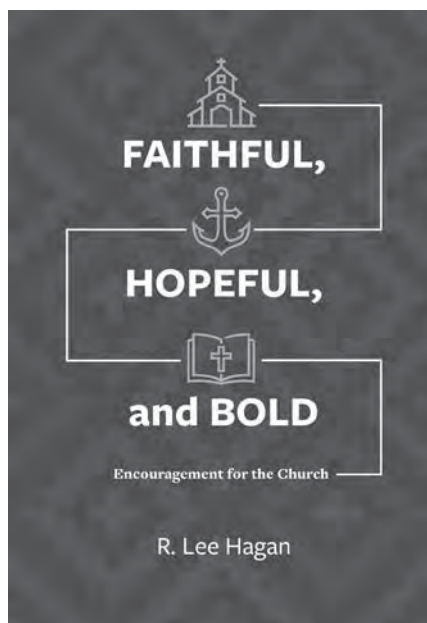
FAITHFUL, HOPEFUL, AND BOLD:
Encouragement for the Church. By R.
Lee Hagan. Concordia Publishing House,
2025. Paperback. 176 pages. \$17.99.

When I teach classes on congregational administration, I encourage the use of brief study time when church boards, committees, or councils meet. This is to integrate God's word and theological reflection into the business of these meetings. I commend this practice also in my book

on church organization, encouraging congregational leaders to use not only the Bible but also secondary theological literature that is thematically focused

(*Organizing for Ministry and Mission: Options for Church Structure*, Concordia Publishing House, 2023, 147–153).

My students frequently ask me for recommendations on books to use for this purpose. I will now include Dr. Lee Hagan's book—*Faithful, Hopeful, and Bold*—toward the top of my list of recommended resources to promote spiritual learning and growth among congregational leaders.



Indeed, this is the use that Hagan commends at the beginning of the book. He writes: “This book was written to be discussed among congregational leaders. I would encourage pastors and church leaders to read the book as part of the work of a board or committee, with the desired outcome being particular action to strengthen the faith and embolden the witness of the leaders and the congregation members, individually and corporately” (7). The book is ideal for

this purpose because it reflects the real-life circumstances and challenges that church lay leaders face in carrying out their roles and responsibilities on behalf of Christian congregations.

The book is organized into twelve reflections (actually, fourteen, if you include the introduction and epilogue), each of which focuses on a distinct topic that relates to Christian life and witness in

the twenty-first century. Hagan states that “the reflections are written so that they do not have to be read in sequence” (7), so the board or committee can be selective regarding which units are read and in what order. This flexibility is a strength of the resource because it gives

leaders the opportunity to customize using the book's content to fit the needs of their context and congregation.

At the beginning of each reflection, the reader is directed to prepare by reading a section of scripture, ranging from several chapters to an entire book of the Bible. The essay then provides exposition of the reading, relating its message to contemporary issues of ministry and mission. This grounds the discussion in an extended passage of scripture, and the exposition is frequently supported by parallel passages beyond the assigned reading. Thus, the reflections are biblically grounded. Moreover, each essay turns to the heart of the Christian message, the gospel of Christ. This forms readers to become more biblically guided and evangelically oriented in their service in the church.

As I read the reflections, I discerned various approaches in their development. First, there are lessons taken from specific books of the Bible: Colossians (reflection 1), Philippians (reflection 3), Ephesians (reflection 4), and Revelation 2–3 (reflection 7). Then there are essays that focus on contemporary challenges to Lutheran congregations: the grounds for hope (introduction), the vitality of small congregations (reflection 1), the difficulty of a post- and anti-Christian culture (reflection 2), and grief over lost glory days (reflection 10). Several reflections highlight important characteristics and practices of healthy churches: collaboration among leaders (reflection 3), collaboration among congregations (reflection 4), celebration of unity and

diversity (reflection 5), community as sinners/saints (reflection 6), and mission through vocations (reflection 11). A few essays commend the leadership stances of being followers (reflection 8), servants (reflection 9), and even optimists (reflection 10). The final essays are future oriented, encouraging readers to trust God's promises (reflection 12) while taking action steps into the future (epilogue).

Since these reflections are intended to engage groups of people (e.g., members of boards and committees), each essay concludes with a set of discussion questions. These guiding questions are succinct and directed toward application in the distinct congregational contexts of the readers. An added value is that each set of questions directs the discussion to God's gracious work and promises for the church.

The book is strong in delivering a biblical foundation and evangelical heart. Another important asset is that it rings true to life. The situations and scenarios depicted are real. This is especially evident when it addresses some of the most pressing challenges that LCMS congregations are facing today, such as declining membership, receding influence in society, loss of prestige and power, diminishing volunteerism, antagonism from cultural forces, and the ethos of incivility. Hagan speaks to these as one who has shepherded congregations who face them, both as a parish pastor and as a district president. You sense that the author knows the real world inhabited by congregational leaders—pastors, church staff, lay leaders. Accordingly,

he is realistic about addressing these conditions and challenges. But the book is also hopeful and encouraging, directing the readers to God's work, God's word, and God's promises that will sustain and embolden them to advance his ministry and mission.

The most significant limitation of the book is its scope of readers. Clearly, its intended audience is Missouri Synod Lutherans. Might one assume it is only for Missouri Synod Lutherans? The scenarios depicted are typical of LCMS congregations, including locations primarily in the Midwest and characters with surnames like Schmidt and Lehmann. The historical references are mostly from the Lutheran Reformation of the 1500s, the Saxon immigration of the 1800s, and of LCMS congregations in the 2000s. It is assumed that artifacts like *Portals of Prayer* and LWML mite boxes are familiar to the readers. The book notes or quotes primarily Lutheran sources, especially Martin Luther and the Lutheran Confessions, but also notable Lutheran leaders such as Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Bo Giertz, and Herman Sasse. Most of those quoted were or are in the LCMS, such as Al Berry, Louis Brighton, Martin Franzmann, Henry Gerecke, Robert Kolb, Michael Middendorf, Norman Nagel, Daniel Preus, J. A. O. Preus III, Gene Veith, and Lucas Woodford. In some ways this parochial approach is endearing, for Hagan relates to LCMS readers in very familial and familiar ways. But the flip side is that its familiarity to LCMS insiders might make non-LCMS readers

feel like outsiders. This is lamentable, because the content of these essays holds significant benefit for readers from other denominational traditions as well.

Nevertheless, I highly recommend this book be used by leaders in Christian congregations, especially LCMS churches. It is intended to be used among gatherings of congregational boards and committees, and its use will bring great blessing to them. I think it would also serve well to be read and discussed among church staffs and parochial school faculties. Hagan prays that his book "will encourage congregation leaders to be faithful, hopeful, and bold with the faith and strength kindled in them by the Holy Spirit" (7). I join him in that prayer and anticipate such God-pleasing results through reading and reflecting on the words of this book.

David Peter

WORD MADE FRESH: An Invitation to Poetry for the Church. By Abram Van Engen. *Eerdmans*, 2024. Paper. 298 pages. \$26.99.

This is a book that needed to be written. End stop. Fortunately for us, one of the best people to have written it is Abram Van Engen. Van Engen is the Stanley Elkin Professor in the Humanities, former chair of the English department, and director of the John C. Danforth Center on Religion and Politics, all at Washington University, St. Louis. He has published widely on religion and

literature, with a scholarly focus on early American literature. He also co-hosts the podcast *Poetry for All*.

It is perhaps this last project that motivated this book. It is written from the observation that many people, especially Christians, believe that poetry is simply not “for them,” and yet they live in a reality that is very often the opposite.

Any person who spends any amount of time within the life of a church is inevitably, and often unwittingly, immersed in an ocean of poetic language. The biblical Psalms would be just the start. Hymns and sacred songs (both traditional and contemporary), litanies and prayers spoken responsively, and even, in its

own way, the creeds all open us up to lines of language that at least approach poetry, even when badly composed. Even those texts that present themselves as prose often erupt into poetry, the logos of John 1 or the *kenosis* of Philippians 2 being only the most famous examples. What are the Beatitudes if not a kind of Whitmanesque list-poem? What is the Lord’s Prayer if not a kind of prayer-poem

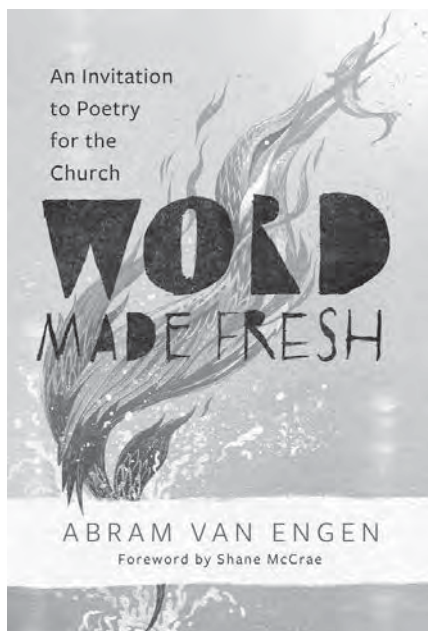
whose seven petitions condense into one all the yearnings of all 150 psalms?

The trouble that Van Engen points out is that we often aren’t aware of this fact, and—even worse—we don’t open ourselves up to the power this way of speaking can inspire within us, both individually and as communities of faith. Beginning with the simple fact that the

Bible itself is charged throughout with the electricity of poetry, Van Engen invites us to encounter poetry as an encounter of faith. At its simplest, “poetry makes language work in ways that wake us up to the world God made” (13). Van Engen goes on to organize his invitation into two sections to helpfully overcome the two main obstacles of would-be readers of poems: first, “How” to read a poem, and

second, “Why” to read one anyway. This logic may seem backward, but Van Engen provocatively hints that it’s often the “how” that shows us the “why.”

One of Van Engen’s quite practical encouragements is to just simply read a lot of poems, which is relatively easy because—unlike novels or memoirs—most don’t take very long to read. Discard the ones you don’t like. But



here's his promise, which delivers: inevitably you will find one or more that you do like. And the beauty of a poem is that once you find one you like, you can read it again and find even more you like about it. Rinse and repeat. And then a quite amazing thing can happen. You may actually find yourself returning to the poems you discarded and find something you like in them too.

Fortunately, when you read *Word Made Flesh*, you will have already read a lot of poems. Van Engen curates the book in such a way that it almost doubles as an excellent anthology of poems worth reading, with the kind of commentary that gives readers, when they find a poem they like, a sense of where they might go next to read more. In that regard, for those who would like to know where to go next after reading *Word Made Fresh*, I would encourage you to seek out Christian Wiman's *He Held Radical Light*, Dana Gioia's *Poetry as Enchantment*, and, if you are then feeling even more adventurous, Mary Ruefle's *Madness, Rack, and Honey*.

Within the confines of this admittedly glowing review, permit me one point of critique. Virtually all of the poems Van Engen discusses in *Word Made Fresh* come from a relatively standard British-American literary canon. That in itself is not necessarily a problem, and his engagement with that canon is broad. But I would have greatly enjoyed reading his insights into poetries that human beings encounter and celebrate in other ways beyond the stereotypical "literary" act of sitting in a chair and

(silently) reading the lines we see in a book. The tradition of "spoken word" poetry would be one example, where the primary way to encounter the poem is by hearing the poet recite it out loud within a gathered assembly of fellow hearers. Sound familiar? I think this would have enlarged even further his persuasive argument that poetic language is the language closest to God's heart.

On a final note, it is not lost on me that the title *Word Made Fresh*—an unmistakable play on John 1:14—would also make a great title for a book on preaching. And for those of us who regularly step into a pulpit, Van Engen's book widens our eyes to the connections between a poem and a sermon, and the power of language that uniquely animates both in very similar ways. Speaking as a person who has made a career out of writing, reading, studying, and teaching poetry and, at the same time, writing, reading, studying, and teaching sermons, my preaching has been made immeasurably better by my encounters with poems. I am quite certain the same would hold true for any preacher who would read this book.

Travis Scholl
St. Louis, Missouri



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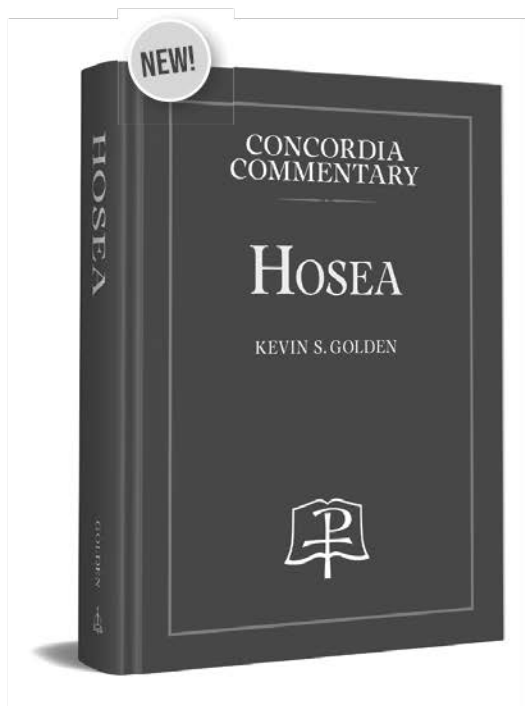
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